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(see pages 126 & 141)

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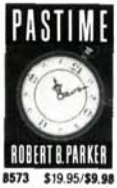

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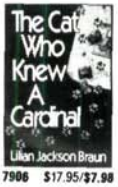

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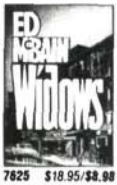

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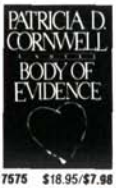

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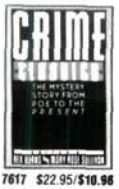

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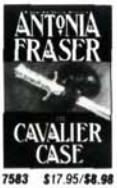

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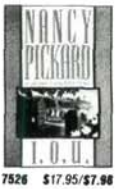

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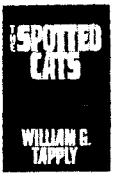

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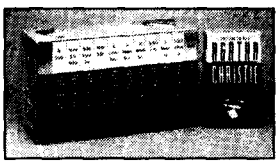

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a *NEW* short story by

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It started to snow. Slowly at first, big flakes wafting out of the dark, then more heavily. A blizzard. In August. Bren blinked, rubbed his eyes, but the snow kept coming.

He fought down a surge of panic. The snow wasn't real. He knew it, he'd seen it before. It was only a speeder dream, a hallucination. But one with a heavy message. Too little sleep, too many amphetamines. Wake up, Brennan, you're close to the edge.

In reviewing his first novel, The Cheerio Killings *(St. Martin's),* Publishers Weekly *said of Doug Allyn, "He displays a flair for gritty, colloquial dialogue . . . and a talent for making even the most incidental characters flesh-and-blood originals . . ."*

SPEED DEMON

by DOUG ALLYN

"Put this hearse in reverse, I wanna live my life over againnn—" Brennan roared out the chorus, bellowing along with KCQ, Michigan North Country, over the truck radio in his eighteen-wheeler. He was rolling through the middle of a hot August night, southbound on a secondary road, hammer down, headed for Motown with a load of engine blocks from a factory in Kenosha, Wisc. The radio was cranked to the max, the rig's windows were wide open, the windblast ripping into the cab, making his eyes stream, but the racket wasn't working any more. Bren had been twitching the last thirty miles, nodding out, his head jerking up from split-second blankouts. Almost home. Eight days on the road, crisscrossing four states and the Canadian border, more'n seven thousand miles, the last fifteen hundred or so running strung-out on coffee, No-Doz, poppers, Black Beauties, and raw nerve.

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Just one more hour, please, Lord. We can fuel up at the Big 76 truck stop in Saginaw by three, crash for some quick Zs there, and still make delivery in Motown by seven. If we're not dead in a ditch by then, or in jail.

First things first. Bren eased the big rig over on the shoulder and switched off his headlights, rumbling along in the orange halo of the running lights, letting the Peterbilt's own weight slow it as it climbed the long hill. He touched his air brakes a couple of car lengths from the top, stopping the truck, then switched on his emergency flashers and killed the radio.

He folded his arms across the wheel, lowered his forehead to his wrists, and allowed himself the luxury of closing his eyes. Sweet darkness in the midnight Michigan silence. He rested a few minutes, knowing he was too wired up to doze off, listening to the nightsounds, frogs, the murmur of the idling truck, Griz snoring softly in the lower bunk of the sleeper cab behind him. Time was when stopping the rig would have awakened Griz long enough to ask where they were, how it was going, but it'd been beaucoup years since anything short of a train wreck woke Griz up.

Suck it up, Brennan, you can always roll one more hour. He took a ragged breath, rubbed his stubbled face with his hands, shook his head hard trying to clear it. Then he grabbed the 10×50 Bausch binoculars out of the glove box, slung them around his neck, and climbed down out of the cab.

The gravel shoulder of the road felt alive beneath his feet, quivering like a California quake. He forced himself to jog on wobbly knees to the top of the hill, breaking an instant sweat in the humid summer darkness. He knelt at the crest and scanned the road ahead with the binocs.

Damn.

A Department of Transportation patrol car was parked in a cutout a quarter mile ahead at the foot of the hill. No big surprise—the dots often sat there waiting to snare big rigs who ran out-route to avoid the weigh station on I-75 at Birch Run. Bren checked his watch. Nearly one. He zeroed the binoculars in on the car and watched it for what felt like a year. Nothing. No movement, no cigarette glow, zip.

He rose slowly, then strolled back down to his rig. He took his time running a safety check on the cab and trailer—tires, brake and electrical connections, cargo chains, the works. He brought his log book up to date, mileage, hours driven, hours slept, and forged Griz's

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signature on it. Then he walked back up the hill to scan the DOT car again. The safety check had taken roughly fifteen minutes and there was still no sign of activity. Asleep? Maybe.

He climbed back up into the cab, fished his hideaway magnetic matchbox from under the dash, and slid it open. Ten pills left. Four Black Beauties, a half dozen Mexican white crosses. Enough speed to fly all night and then some. He swallowed two of the Beauties dry, gave 'em a few minutes to kick in, then shifted the Peterbilt into first gear and crawled the truck toward the top of the hill.

Decision time. He checked the DOT car one last time through the binocs. No action. The next hill was only half as high as this one, sooo— Go for it. He killed the truck's flashers and running lights, then eased it over the top.

He kept the Peterbilt on the shoulder, running blacked out, letting inertia carry it down the hill. Even with the motor on idle, the whine of the rubber on the road seemed deafening in the dark. He was doing forty plus when he rumbled past the DOT car. No response. The guy must be zonked.

He had a bad moment near the crest of the next hill, afraid the Pete wouldn't have enough momentum to make the top without risking some engine noise. The big rig slowed to a bare ten miles per when he rolled over the crest, but he made it.

Yes! Yes! Yes! He hammered the wheel with his fist, feeling the rush of winning one over the DOT combine with the ragged surge of energy from the Black Beauties.

"Mmmmmph?" Griz mumbled from the bunk.

"Nothin', Griz. Go back to sleep." Wired up now, pumped and enjoying the game, Bren kept the rig on the shoulder, blacked out. Hell, maybe he'd drive all the way to Saginaw like this, floating along like a ghost, invisible, saving fuel.

It started to snow. Slowly at first, big flakes wafting out of the dark, then more heavily. A blizzard. In August. Bren blinked, rubbed his eyes, but the snow kept coming.

He fought down a surge of panic. The snow wasn't real. He knew it, he'd seen it before. It was only a speeder dream, a hallucination. But one with a heavy message. Too little sleep, too many amphetamines. Wake up, Brennan, you're close to the edge.

Sweet Jesus, he was already over the edge, rolling through the hills in the dark, blacked out— He switched on the Pete's headlights and a face leapt at him out of the darkness. God! A guy was standing

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on the shoulder barely twenty yards ahead— Bren cranked the wheel hard to the left, bucking the truck out onto the road. The man just stood there, frozen as a flash-blind rabbit in the headlights, staring up at the cab as eight hundred tons of steel thundered toward him.

The trailer lurched and started to jackknife, its tires smoking and howling as it swung around, its terrible weight dragging the tractor cab toward the ditch. Bren slammed the shift into sixth gear and matted the pedal, powering up, trying to gain enough speed to straighten the rig and keep the trailer from flipping. White-knuckle time, furiously spinning the wheel, countersteering, fighting to keep the trailer from skidding around the other way, skill and reflexes warring with rubber and steel and the laws of physics. Somehow Bren wrestled the cab back out in front, the trailer jerking and fishtailing behind him, trying to break loose again as he fought to slow the truck and get it under control.

It took well over a mile to bring the rig to a shuddering halt, rocking on its tires on the wrong side of the road.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Griz demanded blearily from the tangle of bedding on the floor of the sleeper.

But Bren had already vaulted out of the cab, sprinting across the highway, pounding back up the hill to where he'd seen the man with—

The woman. Bren slowed his pace from a sprint to a jog, then to a wobbly, chest-heaving walk. His throat was burning, dry as sandpaper from adrenaline and amphetamines. But his memory was beginning to clear. The guy he'd seen on the roadside was carrying a woman in his arms. No question about it. He'd seen them both clearly from only a few feet away. But he especially remembered the woman.

Because she was dead.

He stopped, head down, hands on his knees, gagging down a surge of bile in his throat, trying not to cough up his cookies in the ditch. The woman was dead. Her head was lolling unnaturally, eyes sightless, uncaring, as an eight-hundred-ton truck rumbled past within inches of her face.

The man? Bren swallowed, trying to focus on the man's face, not able to recall it clearly. The man had seemed to glow in the headlights, to glitter. A big man. A monster. Truly. A monster. Frankenstein. Carrying a dead woman. He'd seen them both as clearly as he'd seen—

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The snow. If Bren hadn't felt so nauseous, it would have been hysterical. A dream. He'd been running up the road like a wino with his pants afire chasing after a damn speeder dream. Still, the vision seemed so intense, so realistic, that he continued up the road a ways just to be sure.

Zilch. No Frankenstein, no woman. The horizon brightened momentarily as a car crested the hill. The DOT? He winced as a station wagon roared past him in the dark, the windblast shaking him like a twig.

Enough. Time to go. The next car might be the DOT. He turned and walked unsteadily back to the rig.

Griz was bleeding his lizard in the ditch when Bren walked up. The old man looked like he'd been sleeping under a bridge, white hair awry, three-day stubble, one suspender undone.

"Hey," Griz said, "next time you wanna wake me up fast, just poke me in the eyeball with an icepick, okay? Be easier on the nerves. What the hell happened, anyway?"

"A speeder dream, I guess," Bren said, still only half believing it. "You awake?"

"Damn straight I'm awake," Griz grunted, zipping his fly, "you're lucky I didn't crap my drawers in the rack. What kinda speeder dream?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," Bren said, "but I think you better take the rig until Saginaw anyway."

"Yeah," Griz said. "I think you're right."

The yellow-and-black Manistee County school bus was just pulling away as Bren wheeled the Peterbilt down the twin ruts of his driveway and parked it beside the barn. He sat there in the sudden silence for a minute, bone-deep relieved to be home but feeling like he'd been skinned and stretched out on a barbwire fence. Rock bottom.

He climbed painfully down out of the cab and leaned against it, letting the morning sun wash a welcome over him. A couple of Herefords glanced up in his direction, then went back to nosing their empty feed trough, dumber'n coalbuckets. Eighty acres of rolling pastureland, crisscrossed with fences, a small split-level ranch house, chicken coop, three barns, all in need of paint. Mockingbird Hill.

Emmaline stepped out onto the front porch barefoot, wearing his old plaid bathrobe, her hair in curlers. "Hi, babe," she said, giving

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him a thin, skin-deep smile. "Welcome back. You hungry?"

"Hungry enough to eat fried cowflop and beg and plead for seconds."

"Shape you're in, you probably would," she said. "Why didn't you call ahead? I look like a roadkill."

"Didn't have time. I just flat ran outa steam in Saginaw, didn't think I could make Detroit, so I sold the load there and came on home."

"You sold the load?"

"I was whipped," Bren said. "Hell, we've been out eight days."

"And how many of those days did Griz actually drive? Two? Three?"

"Don't you worry about Uncle Griz, that old man's still got plenty of miles left in him. And don't worry about how you look, either, Emma darlin'. Compared to Griz Behr and the inside of that Pete, gettin' home feels like I've died, gone to heaven, and you're queen of the angels."

"I'll buy into half of that," she said. "You definitely look like you died a ways back. Come on in, I'll fry you up a cowflop. Or something."

Bren woke suddenly, clawing his way out of the blackness, fighting a dream. He felt godawful, sweat-slick, shaky, stir-fried and left on the griddle too long. The couch. He was on the living-room couch, still wearing the clothes he'd driven the last seven hundred miles in. Hadn't made it to the bedroom. Hell, he hadn't even taken off his boots. One-thirty the wagon-wheel clock on the mantel said. He tried to do the math, figure out how long he'd been asleep. Couldn't quite manage. "Emma?"

No answer. He glanced around the sunlit, knotty-pine room. It felt strange, alien as a motel, unfriendly. He needed another twelve hours sleep, but if he crashed now he'd snap awake at two A.M. and wouldn't be worth a damn tomorrow. Unless he popped maybe just one more Mexican white cross—

No. No way. The way he felt, one more speeder'd likely put him in a rubber room. Bad enough he was seeing snow again, and—

Frankenstein? There was a new face. Or an old one, depending on how you look at it. But ugly as Frank was, Bren had seen worse things when he'd done speed a few days in a row. Hell, back in his single days he woke up next to a woman who coulda been Frank's sister.

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That was it. That's what the dream was about. The woman. The dead woman Frank was carrying. Man alive, he was gonna have to find a new source for Black Beauties if he was going to keep seeing things like that woman. He stood up slowly, took a ragged breath, shook off the dream, and stumbled off to the bathroom.

The sweet home aroma of frying bacon was floating in the air like incense when Brennan climbed out of the tub. He gave himself a shaky shave, then slipped into a clean T-shirt, faded jeans, and work boots and followed his nose to the kitchen.

"Hi. Bacon and pancakes in the afternoon?" he said.

"You look like you need the calories," Em said brusquely. "Sit yourself, have some coffee, catch up on the news. I've got to leave for work in a few minutes, but I think we'd better talk before I go."

"About what?" he said, easing warily down in the dark pine captain's chair at the kitchen table.

"About you and Griz and speed," Em said, flipping a pancake onto the serving plate. "You promised me you were gonna quit using that junk."

"I don't really *use* it," Bren said, avoiding her eyes, riffling through the stack of newspapers beside his plate. "I just pop one once in a while to stay alert."

"Damn it, Bren," Em snapped, "don't lie to me, you've got no talent for it. My God, you looked like a zombie when you rolled in this morning. You don't look much better now."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," Bren said, "it's always good to be home. Look, darlin', we were out eight days, gettin' good loads, musta cleared close to seventeen grand. I can lay low for a week now, catch up on the work around here, pay some bills. Everything's under control. I'm just doin' what I have to to get by."

"And what's Griz doing while you're getting by?"

"Babe, I'm not up to hasslin' with you about this again. Uncle Griz taught me everything I know about goin' over the road and I'm not gonna cut him loose just because he's startin' to show a little snow on his roof. Everybody gets old, you know?"

"You won't, Bren," she said, banging the platter of cakes and bacon down on the table, "the way you're goin', you won't live long enough. The question is whether me and the kids will still be around to— What's wrong?"

"I—don't know," he said, blinking, tracing a headline with his finger. SEARCH CONTINUES. "What's this all about?" he said, pointing at the photo above the article.

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"A kidnaping or something over in Traverse City," she said. "A doctor's home was broken into last week and he and his wife were beaten up pretty badly. He's hospitalized, I think, and now she's disappeared. Why?"

"I saw this woman," Bren said, "on 131 east of Traverse, about two this morning. A guy was carrying her. I think she may have been dead."

"Are you serious?"

"Darlin', I'll joke about a lotta things, but dead isn't one of 'em."

"No," she said, reading his face as he pored over the paper, "I guess not."

Bren was mucking out a stall when they came. He was stripped to the waist, forking horse manure into a wheelbarrow, enjoying the work, the solid heft of the pitchfork, the sheltering dusk of the horsebarn out of the August glare. He had the barrow half loaded when the barn suddenly dimmed. A man was silhouetted in the doorway, blocking the light. A portly type, maybe six foot, wearing a rumpled brown uniform, no cap, an oversized gunbelt losing the battle of the bulge with his belly.

"Mr. Brennan?"

"Back here." Bren piled on another forkful, tamping the load down.

"I'm Gene Lewandowski from the Benzie County Sheriff's Department. This is Sergeant Shields, Michigan State Police." Shields was a rangy giant, six-six, two-forty, beefy Irish face, heavily freckled, flushed from the sun, his knife-edge-creased uniform impeccable as a recruiting poster.

"I'd offer to shake hands," Bren said, "but as you can see I'm hip-deep in horseapples. What can I do for you?"

"Go ahead on with your work," Lewandowski said affably, easing his bulk down on a hay bale. He had a thin, wheezy voice, like air was leaking out of the innertube around his waist. "I enjoy seein' a man do honest labor now and again. Makes me grateful I don't have to work for a livin' myself."

"That why you drove over here?" Bren said. "To watch me work?"

"No, sir," Lewandowski smiled, "actually, we wanted to talk to you about the report you phoned in. How certain are you it was Mrs. Delisle you saw?"

"As sure as I can be, considering I blew past about fifty miles an hour."

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"How about the location?" Shields asked. The trooper's voice was so chilly Bren glanced up at him a moment before answering.

"I'm dead sure about the location. Did you guys find anything there or not?"

"We stopped at your uncle's on the way over," Lewandowski said, still smiling vaguely at nothing in particular. "He didn't seem so sure of the location. In fact, I'd have to say Mr. Behr wasn't very cooperative at all."

"No reason he should be. Cops don't rate very high on an independent trucker's Christmas list, and Griz was asleep at the time, anyway. Look, what is all this? I told you what I saw, and that's really all I *can* do, so unless you've got somethin' heavy on your mind, I've got horseshit to shovel."

"Fair enough," Lewandowski said, his smile fading a bit. "Here's our problem. You called in saying you'd possibly seen Mrs. Delisle being carried by an unidentified man near a cutout on 131. As it happens, we'd already found her body, very near to where you said it might be. The problem is the Department of Transportation had a car sitting on 131 last night, and the officer says you weren't there. And the log book in your truck says the same thing. So maybe you'd like to explain to me how it is you knew where Mrs. Delisle's body would be."

"Now wait just a minute," Bren said, straightening. "You think maybe I had something to do with it? Hell, I'm the one who called you, remember?"

"Happens all the time," Shields said. "Perps can't stand the suspense, so they call and ask about a crime, or offer information. Just like you did. Dr. Delisle says two men broke into his home, mugged him badly enough to put him in the hospital. Then three days later his wife is abducted and murdered. And since we don't have much crime up here, Mr. Brennan, we assume we're looking for the same two men. Like maybe you and your uncle, for instance. Neither of you are exactly virgins when it comes to violence."

"Violence?" Bren said. "If you're talkin' about occasional misunderstandings in saloons, or Griz takin' a tire iron to some guy who was tryin' to make time with his wife while he was out on the road, maybe we aren't virgins. But that's just minor bullshit and you know it. We never stole anything, never really hurt anybody didn't have it comin'. And we sure as hell never did anything like you're talkin' about."

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"We haven't said you did," Lewandowski put in smoothly. "On the other hand, you see our problem. So I think I'll have Sergeant Shields here read you your rights just as a formality. And then I'd like you to tell us your story one more time." He reached into his uniform pocket and took out a small magnetic box. Bren's speeder hideaway from the truck. He tapped it idly against his palm. "And this time, Mr. Brennan, maybe you'd better tell us everything, okay?"

So Bren did. Or at least everything he thought they'd believe. He gave them the details of every run, where they'd picked up freight, where they'd delivered it and when. How after six days out, Griz was nodding out, so Bren did most of the driving, poppin' speed to stay awake. But the bottom line was, it didn't make any difference. Running Detroit to Windsor to Chicago to Kenosha and around again, they'd passed through the area five times in eight days. Nothing necessarily incriminating in that, but no alibi, either. And when Bren finished, Shields told him to put his shirt on and they took him out to the navy-blue Michigan State police cruiser. Griz was already there, in the back seat behind the wire grille, looking as bleary and raggedy ass and scared as Brennan felt.

Nobody had much to say on the trip over to Traverse. Lewandowski tried some small talk with Griz, but Bren shot his uncle a look that shut him up. The problem was, Lewandowski seemed genuinely friendly, a guy you'd take a stool next to in a strange bar, buy him a beer, listen to him gab. Bren liked him instinctively, which made the pudgy, balding sheriff about five times more dangerous than Shields the hardcase. Lewandowski put up a good Joe Sixpack front, but there was a badge on his rumpled shirt—he was still The Man.

Bren figured they'd haul them straight to jail, do not pass Go, do not collect $200. They didn't. Shields radioed ahead that they were coming in. And they drove into the Bay Area General Hospital lot, parking the cruiser near the emergency entrance.

"This is how it is, guys," Lewandowski said, shifting his bulk around in the front seat to face them. "You're welcome to call an attorney, which you can do from the county lockup. Or you can take part in a little exercise we've set up here. With any luck, you'll be back home again in time for a late supper. What do you say?"

"What kind of an exercise?" Griz asked.

"I don't think you quite got the picture, old timer," Shields said curtly. "We ask the questions, you answer. And the question was,

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do you want to call your lawyer from jail or take a chance on walking away from this right now? Unless, of course, you've got something to hide."

"I got a few things I might not want my mama to hear about, Stretch," Griz said, "but I got nothin' to hide from you and your fatbutt buddy here. And quit callin' me old timer. Your wife calls me Mr. Big."

"I don't understand it, Shields," Lewandowski sighed, "how a nice fella like you always seems to bring out the pit bull in folks. What do you say we run this thing up the flagpole, gents, see if anybody salutes?"

Lewandowski led the way into the hospital, past the emergency room and down a narrow first-floor corridor, with Shields bringing up the rear. A half dozen men in work clothes were clustered at the end of the hall near the fire door, with two state troopers looking on. Bren recognized Tudy LaRouche, a guy he'd known in high school, a loser then and since. He didn't know the others. Tudy looked away.

"All right, gentlemen, and I use the term loosely," Shields said, "form up a line and file through the doorway on your left. No talking, please."

Bren and Griz joined the line and followed Shields into the room—an ordinary private hospital room with one bed, a big guy in it wearing a blue bathrobe over a hospital gown, dark hair slicked back, pasty-faced as a vampire. He was sitting upright braced between two narrow sandbags, his head held rigid by a thick white foam-rubber brace around his throat. One cheek was bruised, a purple welt ringed by a greenish rainbow.

The eight men formed a half circle facing the foot of the bed. The vampire scanned each of them intently, wordlessly, moving only his eyes. Bren met his gaze straight on, but felt nothing in it—no hostility, or even curiosity. Empty. Dead as a roadkilled raccoon. The vampire's stare seemed to linger a bit longer on Griz, then moved on. When he'd finished looking over the line, he glanced at Shields, passing a silent message.

"That's all, men. Please file out and wait in the hall."

Nobody had anything to say, they just waited a few minutes, and then Shields came out and arrested Tudy LaRouche and Griz, suspicion of homicide in the murder of Elaine Delisle.

It happened so quickly, Bren barely had time to react. As Lewandowski and a deputy led the two men off, Bren grabbed Shields' arm, spinning him around, and found himself immediately pinioned

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by two state troopers, slammed face first into a wall, and held there, his mouth mashed against the cool white tiles, tasting the bite of antiseptic.

"You got a problem, Mr. Brennan?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Bren grated out of the corner of his mouth. "You know damn well Griz didn't kill anybody! He was with me the whole time!"

"I'm not forgetting that," Shields said. "With any luck you'll be back together soon. But for now, the doc's made his I.D. and we'll both have to live with it. Unless you'd like us to book you for assault?"

"No," Bren said, "I'm cool. Tell 'em to let me go."

"Please?" Shields asked.

Bren swallowed hard. "Yeah, okay, please tell 'em to let me go." Shields nodded and the two troopers released Bren, backing warily away to stand beside the sergeant.

Bren faced them, barely holding himself in check, only a split second away from going for all three of them, seeing how much damage he could do before—

No. It'd be too stupid. The big red-faced trooper would love to put him away with Griz. And he couldn't help the old man from the slammer. Still, it was a near thing. He gagged down his anger, and some pride. "If that guy identified Griz as one of the men who roughed him up, he's dead wrong."

"I think he's wrong, too," Shields said evenly, "but not about your uncle. I think he's wrong about Tudy. On the other hand, you two look a bit alike, you and Tudy. Maybe the doc'll change his mind. Now take a hike, Brennan, but don't go too far. I may want to talk to you again."

So Bren walked, out to the bank of pay phones beside the hospital entrance. He tried three different attorneys out of the yellow pages, offices and home numbers both, but it was nearly six and all he got was answering machines. He tried his home. No answer there, either—Em would be at work until ten, the kids with the sitter.

Terrific. Now what? His stomach rumbled a partial answer. He hadn't eaten anything since his late breakfast and it had already been one helluva day.

He walked the half mile into town and stopped at the first bar/restaurant he came to that didn't look touristy. Sealey's Joint. Dim, smoky, busy, guys in work clothes battin' the breeze at the bar or

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kibitzing around the pool tables, drinking beer out of quart bottles, the jukebox moaning softly in the background about how proud he was to be an American.

Bren had never been in the place before, but he knew home when he smelled it. He chose a back booth away from the crush, ordered a Bud, a barbecue sandwich, a side of fries'n'gravy from a peroxide-blonde grandmother in a salmon-pink uniform. The beer was icy, the chow was hot'n'greasy and Bren tore into it like a wolverine. He'd wolfed about half of it down when Sheriff Lewandowski wandered in and backslapped and gladhanded his way through the crowd back to Bren's booth.

"Mr. Brennan? Mind if I sit?" he said, easing his bulk down without waiting for an answer.

"If you're gonna arrest me, at least let me finish my feed first. I've had a tough day."

"Me, too," Lewandowski said, "and we both had long nights as well. But I'm not here to arrest you, at least not yet."

"Well, if you're here to ruin my dinner, consider it a job well done and leave me alone, okay?"

"Doesn't look ruined to me," Lewandowski said, fishing a fry off Bren's plate, sopping it with gravy, sucking it down like a noodle. "Good food here. Used to spend quite a lot of time in this place. Nice folks. Friendly. And I'm basically a friendly guy. And a curious one. It's one of the neat things about my job. When I get curious about something, I can just ask, and people think I'm working."

"Lucky you."

"I am lucky. Not as lucky as you, maybe, but close."

"How do you figure I'm lucky?" Bren said around a mouthful of his barbecue sandwich, washing it down with a long pull of Bud.

"For openers, you're still in one piece. I checked you out, talked with a few truckers I know. Off the record, they say the way you've been driving you're damn lucky to be alive."

"Maybe they oughta just mind their own business."

"Maybe so," Lewandowski smiled. "That's the way you strike me, Brennan, as a man who works hard, minds his own business. Which makes me wonder why you called us this afternoon."

"Just doin' my duty as a citizen," Bren said. "Don't worry, it won't happen again."

"No? Why not?"

"Get real, Lewandowski. I tried to help you out and my uncle winds up in the slammer on a bum rap, that's why not."

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"Your uncle's okay. As burned out as he is, he could probably sleep on a railroad track. One night on the county won't hurt him a bit. He's been there before."

"One night?" Bren said warily.

"How long he stays may depend entirely on you, Mr. Brennan."

"Like if I confess you'll turn Griz loose, that it?"

"Not at all. Your uncle's in jail because the good doctor identified him as one of the men who broke into his home and mugged him last week. And to be frank, Jack Shields thinks Dr. Delisle made a mistake when he identified Tudy LaRouche as the second man."

"Yeah, he kinda mentioned that to me."

"Well, for what it's worth, I agree with him. I don't think Tudy was the second man, either. Which troubles me some. Because if the doc's right about your uncle and *you* claim you were with him the whole time—"

"I don't *claim* anything—we were together, period."

"Exactly. And you're quite a bit taller than your uncle, aren't you? Nearly a head, I'd say."

"Probably," Bren said. "So what?"

"That's what struck me oddly. The good doctor never mentioned that the second man was taller. In fact, his descriptions were pretty vague for a guy as bright as he is. So it surprised me a little when he picked out Tudy and your uncle so positively. It might have made me wonder about the whole situation except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"You, Mr. Brennan. You're the witness. You knew where the body was, so at least that much of what you told us was true."

"I told you everything I know, damn it!"

"No, sir—I don't think so and neither does Jack Shields. Jack's a good cop, an experienced investigator—which is why he and I see things differently sometimes. Jack transferred up to the Traverse City post from Detroit. He's used to random violence among strangers. I'm not. Wanna know something interesting, Brennan? In all the years I've been with the department, we've never had a killing like this one. We've had a couple of holdups that got out of hand, and we've had the occasional mom-and-pop murder. But nothing like this kind of random brutality. And maybe I'm just a hick sheriff, but I'm not so sure we've had one yet."

"What are you saying?"

"It seems pretty straightforward to me. The doc picked two men out of the lineup. The two seediest guys in the room—no offense to

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your uncle intended. He swears they're the men. You claim your uncle was with you. So the doc's either mistaken or he's lying. Which kind of leaves the ball in your court."

"How do you figure?"

"Because this lineup could have gone either way. The doc could have identified you. Or maybe you could have identified him."

"I don't follow you. I've never seen the guy before."

"You saw the woman being carried. You saw her clearly enough to recognize her face from a newspaper photo. But you claim you didn't see the man. I gather you and Tudy know each other, right?"

"From high school," Bren nodded, "but we weren't friends. I'm not covering for him if that's what you're wondering."

"Didn't think so," Lewandowski said. "Which kind of narrows the field. If I take Tudy and you and your uncle out of the picture, the only one left in it is the doc. Which is a picture I kind of like. You see, I've had words with the doc once or twice. His wife seemed to be an uncommonly clumsy lady, always sportin' black eyes and bruises she said she got from fallin' over furniture or runnin' into doors. Plus we'd had a couple of complaints from their neighbors about noise, him yelling, her screaming. Not exactly Ozzie and Harriet, those two. So when they reported that two guys broke into their house and roughed them up last week, I took it with a grain of salt. The doc had taken a header down a flight of stairs and gotten banged up, fractured a couple of vertebrae. But it wouldn't take two men to do that. His wife could have pushed him and, to be honest, I thought she had and good for *her*. We investigated and rousted a few local baddies, but came up empty. End of story, I thought.

"Until a state trooper spotted Mrs. Delisle's body out on 131 this morning. The house had been broken into again, but the doc's still in the hospital, which either means he's telling the truth or there's somebody else involved. Which brings me back to you, Mr. Brennan. My myopic witness. So maybe you'd better explain to me one more time why you saw the *woman* so clearly but not the man you say was carrying her."

Bren eyed the fat man straight on, reading him. Lewandowski met his gaze straight up, not smiling now. "Okay," Bren said slowly, "if it'll help my uncle, I'll tell you, but it won't do you any good."

"Maybe not. Why don't we find out?"

"How much do you know about speed, Sheriff? Poppers, Black Beauties, Mexican white crosses, California turnarounds?"

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"Not a whole lot," Lewandowski said. "I've seen it around, but booze was always my drug of choice. Tell me about it."

"If you can handle it, speed's handy stuff. Black Beauties, for instance, will fire you up, keep you awake, alert, and mellowed out for about fourteen hours at a pop."

"Alert?"

"Yeah, maybe more alert than normal. What happens is, your concentration gets sharper, you zero in on whatever you're doing, totally focus on it. Trouble is, the longer you speed, the tighter that focus gets, till it's like you're looking through a telescope—a narrow field of vision, but still very clear."

"And how long had you been speeding last night? How long since you'd slept?"

"Goin' on three days. And I was gettin' ready to crash. The truth is, I was starting to speeder dream, to see things."

"What kind of things?"

"Yeah, well, that's the real nasty side of speedin'. What happens is, your head starts to shut down. Physically, you're still okay, but mentally you start to lose it. You can't deal with anything complicated, and the longer you're high the stupider you get, until near the end you start to misinterpret things. If the demon sees something he doesn't understand, he'll turn it into something simpler."

"The demon?"

"The speed demon," Bren said, smiling wryly, "the little guy who's half in charge of your head while you're high. Like once I saw some warning lights on a freeway in Oklahoma, so I stopped my rig and watched a train pass for a good five minutes before it dawned on me that trains don't cross freeways. And this one wasn't makin' any noise. And then it disappeared."

"But you watched it for five minutes?"

"Something like that," Brennan shrugged. "What probably happened was I saw a pattern of lights that looked like a railroad-crossing flasher, so the demon showed me the whole train."

"A hallucination, you mean?"

"More like a dream, but at the time it seems absolutely real. Anybody who does much speed has seen things like that—brick horses, trees walking. You learn to sort it out."

"Sort it out how?" Lewandowski asked.

"Simple. When I'm gettin' near the end of my rope, I start to see snow. Like a blizzard. Like the TV screen of my mind is losin' its signal. It was snowing last night. Just before I saw—what I saw."

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"Okay—" Lewandowski nodded grimly "—so you saw a snowfall in August. Then what?"

"I saw the woman. But the man who was carrying her was—Frankenstein."

"Frankenstein," Lewandowski echoed, his tone neutral. "The movie monster?"

"You know any others?"

"I see. Could it have been a man wearing a mask?"

"It could have been anything," Bren said. "I honestly don't know what was actually there, but what the demon showed me was Frankenstein from the movies. Boris Karloff, you know? Big shoulders, big shoes, the works. The point is, that's all I can tell you. It's all I know."

"How about the man's face? Was that Karloff, too?"

"Seemed to be, but I couldn't really see it clearly. It was glowing or something. But from what I recall, it was Boris Karloff."

"It might be a little difficult to serve a warrant on Boris," Lewandowski said, copping another french fry.

"I didn't figure you'd believe me," Bren said.

"Believe what?" Lewandowski said. "That you saw Boris Karloff? You're right, I don't. But from what I gathered, what happens to you when you're strung out is kind of like—a mini-dream, right? And sometimes dreams mean something. So what does Frankenstein mean to you?"

"I've thought about that," Bren nodded. "It really doesn't mean anything to me. Didn't even scare me when I was a kid. I always figured I could outrun him, you know?"

"So you're not afraid of him now?"

"Afraid? No, why should I be? He wasn't real."

"That in itself would scare the hell out of me," Lewandowski said, easing out of the booth, standing up. "How bad do you want to get your uncle out of jail?"

"I guess I'd do pretty much whatever it takes."

"Good. Do you smoke, Mr. Brennan?"

"Smoke? No, why?"

"Neither do I. Not any more. Let's go."

"Whole Earth Health Clinic?" Bren said, reading the handcarved sign hanging from wrought-iron chains above the porch of the stately turn-of-the-century fieldstone home. "What is this?"

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"A house of miracles," Lewandowski said. "I was a two-pack-a-day man for more'n twenty years till I came here."

"What the hell are you talking about? I told you I don't smoke."

"No, sir, you're a man of much nastier habits," Lewandowski said, cutting him off, "but that's not why we're here." He rang the buzzer again. The porchlight flicked on and the front door opened. "Evening, Mrs. Beck, I appreciate your seein' us on such short notice."

"You piqued my curiosity," the woman said, standing aside, ushering them in. "I don't believe I've ever treated an emergency case before." She was late thirtyish, trim and attractive, with tousled sandy hair that looked like she'd combed it with her fingertips, wearing a powder-blue jogging suit and tennis shoes. The house looked lived in—scuffed hardwood floors, antique maple furniture recovered in sturdy twill, books and magazines scattered around. An upright Starck Victrola stood glumly in the corner.

Bren and the sheriff trailed Mrs. Beck into a small, sparely furnished office—a plain oaken schoolmarm desk, a couple of leather chairs facing it. A new-age harp plunked softly over the Sony sound system on a middle shelf of the floor-to-ceiling bookcase. "How are you doing, Gene?" the woman said, waving them toward the chairs.

"Fine, Lois, just fine," Lewandowski said, easing down into one of the chairs, "haven't felt the urge to smoke in months. But that's not exactly why we're here. I remember you saying once you can do—regressions, is that the word? Show people their past lives?"

"I do that occasionally," Mrs. Beck said. "More as a hobby than anything else. It's not a regular part of my practice."

"No, ma'am, I understand that, and it isn't really a past life Mr. Brennan here wants to visit. It's yesterday."

"Yesterday?" The woman glanced at Bren curiously.

"That's right. He saw something yesterday that neither one of us can make sense of. I'm hoping you can take him back a day, let him take a closer look."

"Going back a day shouldn't be overly difficult, if what Mr. Brennan saw isn't too traumatic, and if he's a willing subject. Have you ever been hypnotized, Mr. Brennan?"

"No, ma'am, and I'm not so sure I'm gonna be. How do I know you won't—mess with my head? Maybe make me confess to something, for instance?"

"If you really think I might try to brainwash you, Mr. Brennan, I doubt that any reassurances I can offer would help. Perhaps you'd prefer to have a friend monitor the session?"

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"To a guy who lives the way you do, mister, I'd think risking a little hypnotism would be pretty small potatoes," Lewandowski said. "Maybe it all comes down to a gut check, Brennan. You said you'd do whatever it took to get your uncle out of jail. You willing to try this? Or were you just blowin' smoke?"

"It wasn't smoke," Brennan said grimly. "Okay, fine, what do you want me to do?"

"Very little," Mrs. Beck said, perching on the edge of her desk, letting her ankles swing. "Just sit down next to Gene there and relax. This may not work, anyway. Look up at the top of the wall, where it meets the ceiling. Now concentrate on your breathing. Breathe slowly, all the way in. And now out—"

It didn't work. Bren sat there, listened to the woman babble about picturing himself on a staircase and how he would feel more relaxed with each step downward, but nothing happened. He was just too wired up and ragged from the eight-day run and Black Beauties and—

He was sitting at the Beck woman's desk. A piece of typing paper lay in front of him with some kind of symbol on it. Like a squared-off A with an oval boxed in the upper half. Lewandowski was standing beside him, scowling, tracing the symbol with a blunt fingertip.

"What's that?" Bren asked.

"You don't know?" Lewandowski said, folding the paper and putting it in the breast pocket of his rumpled uniform. "Well, maybe it's nothin', but I'd better check it out in a hurry. Tell you what, Brennan, go back to Sealey's Joint, finish your dinner. I'll meet you there in an hour, one way or the other." And he was gone, moving very quickly for a big man.

"What's going on?" Bren asked Mrs. Beck.

"I'm not sure," she frowned. "I put you under and we worked our way back to early this morning, to something you'd seen from your truck. You couldn't seem to describe it, so I had you draw it."

"You mean I drew that thing?" Bren said, incredulous. "What the hell was it?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Mrs. Beck said, eyeing him oddly, "but the sheriff seemed to think it was a picture of Frankenstein."

Sealey's was even busier than before, the crowd a bit younger, better dressed. Bren took the same booth in the back. A hell of a situation when the only consistent thing in your life is where you

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sit in a saloon. He ordered a side of fries and a long-neck Bud. Lewandowski wandered in forty minutes later, cheerily back-slapping through the crush back to Bren's booth.

"You're lookin' fat and happy," Bren observed.

"Actually, that's my normal state, most days," Lewandowski said. "Jack Shields is a good man, and a good friend, which makes it twice as sweet when I can stick it to him, you know?"

"I wouldn't know," Bren said, "I try not to stick it to my friends."

"No, that's right, you think you stick by 'em, don't you?"

"I try. You gonna tell me what happened?"

"I'm gonna tell everybody," Lewandowski said, leaning back in the booth. "I'm gonna be tellin' people for the next ten years. Shields had you pegged for a stoned psycho, you know, a regular Charlie Manson of the highway."

"And you didn't?"

"Oh, you're a psycho, all right, Brennan. But not that kind. We just don't have that kind of crime up here. This one turned out to be a mom and pop, just like I figured. The doc's over there spilling his guts about it to Shields and a stenographer and anybody else who'll listen. Your little cartoon did the trick."

"My cartoon?"

"Sure." Lewandowski fished the piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and unfolded it on the table. A squared-off A with an O enclosed in the upper half.

"What is it?" Bren said. "Something I saw in a former life?"

"You really don't know, do you?" Lewandowski said, shaking his head. "An amazing thing, the mind—especially when it's half fried on amphetamines. It's simple enough. Doctor Delisle is a spouse-abuser, been knockin' that pretty little wife of his around for years. I talked to her a couple of times, but she always denied it. A few days ago, he slapped her up one time too many and she pushed him down a flight of stairs, banged him up pretty good.

"To avoid a scandal, they cooked up a story about being attacked by a couple of raggedy-ass housebreakers. I never really bought it, but I didn't see the harm in rousting a few local jerks. And I was dead wrong about that. She might still be alive if I hadn't pretended to buy their story."

"What happened?"

"Yesterday the good doctor snowed her into believing everything would be okay now that she'd finally stood up to him. They had a real moving reconciliation. Then he called her from the hospital

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about midnight, said he wanted to come home, asked her to pick him up, said he'd meet her in the parking lot. His room was at the end of the hall. He just hung a do-not-disturb sign on the door and snuck out. In the car, he hit her one good pop and then, ah—" Lewandowski looked away a moment, his eyes narrowing "—and then he strangled her." He picked up Bren's beer, took a long pull, then seemed to realize what he'd done, and replaced it carefully on the table.

"Sorry about that," he said. "Old habit. I'll buy you another."

"It's okay," Brennan said, "you look like you needed it."

"I always do," Lewandowski said. "Anyway, the doc drove to what he thought was a deserted stretch of highway to dump the body, only you came along and scared the hell out of him."

"But I didn't see a car. And there wasn't anyone there when I went back to check."

"The car was there, all right. From what the doc said, I gather you barely missed ramming it in the dark. When you hit him with the headlights, he dropped his dearly beloved in the ditch and got the hell out of there."

"Could have," Brennan nodded. "It took me a few minutes to get the rig stopped and run back up the road. And I didn't actually look in the ditch."

"You might not have seen her, anyway, shape you were in," Lewandowski said. "Anyway, the doc drove back to the house, trashed the place to make it look like another break-in, then walked back to the hospital and snuck back into his room."

"I thought you said this guy had a broken neck?"

"He does. Two fractured vertebrae. An interesting point. It seems there are all kinds of fractures—green stick, compound, compression, hairline—hairline being what the good doctor has. It can be dangerous to move around much, which is why I thought he had to have an accomplice—a guy who looked like Frankenstein, for instance. But he didn't. He didn't need one.

"This little cartoon you drew? It's a picture of a special contraption called a halo brace. It's a steel frame that holds the head rigid in severe neck-injury cases. The doc knew exactly what his condition was and how much movement would be safe, so he filched the brace out of the hospital supplies. It was still in his room, he hadn't had time to put it back. What you saw on the road was a big man with chromed-steel rods sticking out of his head. Which was apparently

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too complicated an idea for your—speed demon? Is that what you call it?"

Bren nodded.

"So it showed a guy who normally has steel sticking out of his head. Frankenstein. That sound right to you?"

"Maybe not 'right,' " Bren said, "but that's how it works. Can Griz and I go home now?"

"Your uncle's free to go when he wakes up, which might not be till next Tuesday, tired as he looks. But you?" Lewandowski shook his head. "I don't think so."

"We had a deal," Bren said. "I did what you asked."

"True enough. You told me the truth, or at least as much as you could. About Frankenstein, and even your speed demon. A scary pair, those two. But you know what really scares me, Brennan? You. Because you're not scared and you should be. You must be half crazy to live the way you do."

"I do what I have to," Bren said.

"Bullshit," Lewandowski snapped, "you're doing exactly what you want. You tell yourself it's for your uncle, or for your family, but it's not. It's for you—you and the demon. You're an addict, Brennan, goin' over the road stoned, strung out, seeing things that aren't real, kidding yourself that you can handle it. You're not hauling that old man around out of loyalty—he's your enabler, your noble excuse to do speed. It's a miracle you haven't killed him and yourself and God knows who else already."

"Funny, I thought you were a lawman," Bren said. "You sound more like a social worker."

"Wrong," Lewandowski said bluntly, "I sound like a junkie—one who's been through it. Remember I said once that booze was my drug of choice? It wasn't just a figure of speech. I'm an alky—dry for now, but I still miss the booze and maybe I always will. And the only difference between you and me is I admit I'm addicted and you don't."

"Or maybe you're wrong about me."

"I could be," Lewandowski nodded. "Like you said, I'm a sheriff, not a social worker. Tell you what, the hospital here's got a great program for substance abusers. I've been through it myself. Why don't we go over there and you tell them about seeing Frankenstein and snowstorms in August, and see what they think about it?"

"And if I don't?"

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Lewandowski met Brennan's eyes straight on, and for a moment there was something cold and hard as a crowbar between them. "An independent trucker's got a tough life," Lewandowski said, his tone neutral. "I could threaten to cite you for chickenshit violations until you lose your license. But I won't. How do you scare a guy who's not afraid of Frankenstein? But think about it, will you, Brennan? Maybe I'll stop by your place tomorrow, we can talk about it some more."

"No." Brennan shook his head. "I spend a lot of time on the road. My time at home's my own. I don't do a lotta company. No offense, Sheriff."

"None taken," Lewandowski said, sliding out of the booth. "I expect I'll be seeing you around anyway, Brennan, on the road. Count on it."

"I'll do that. Tell my uncle I'll be around to pick him up in the morning, okay? And Lewandowski? You asked before if Frankenstein meant anything to me, and I said no. But I've been thinking about it. When I was little, I, ahm, I used to try and warn him."

"Warn him?"

"Sure. In the movies, when the villagers were after him? I felt sorry for him. I wanted him to get away."

"He doesn't, though, does he? He dies in the end. I guess he couldn't hear you."

Brennan eyed him a moment, started to say something, then shook his head. Lewandowski turned and stalked off, pushing through the crowd, not bothering to gladhand this time.

Brennan watched him go, then took a last, thoughtful pull on his Bud and closed his eyes, focusing inwardly, trying to remember exactly what the monster had looked like standing there in the road. He still couldn't see him clearly—

"Are you all right, mister?" The peroxided, grandmotherly waitress had paused beside his table, frowning down at him.

"Yeah," Brennan said, taking a deep breath, "I'm fine, ma'am, just fine. A little tired is all. Check, please?"

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P. D. JAMES

Only once had she asked about her father, and then she had known, as children do, that this was a subject which, for some mysterious adult reason, it was better not to talk about. She had been sitting at the kitchen table with her homework while her aunt was busy cooking supper. Looking up from her history book, she asked: "Where is Daddy buried?"

The frying pan clattered against the stove. The cooking fork dropped from her aunt's hand. It took her a long time to pick it up, wash it, clean the grease from the floor. The child asked once again: "Where is Daddy buried?"

The kind of expert mystery fiction you have come to expect from the masterful and meticulous P. D. James . . .

THE GIRL WHO LOVED GRAVEYARDS

by P. D. JAMES

She couldn't remember anything about that day in the hot August of 1956 when they took her to live with her Aunt Gladys and Uncle Victor in the small house in east London, at 49 Alma Terrace. She knew that it was three days after her tenth birthday and that she was to be cared for by her only living relatives now that her father and grandmother were dead, killed by the influenza within a week of each other.

But those were just facts someone, at some time, had told her briefly. She could remember nothing of her previous life. Those first ten years were a void, unsubstantial as a dream that had faded but that had left on her mind a scar of unarticulated childish anxiety

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and fear. For her, memory and childhood both began with that moment when, waking in the small, unfamiliar bedroom with the kitten, Blackie, still curled up asleep on a towel at the foot of her bed, she had walked barefoot to the window and drawn back the curtain. And there, stretched before her, lay the cemetery, luminous and mysterious in the early-morning light, bounded by iron railings and separated from the rear of Alma Terrace only by a narrow path. It was to be another warm day, and over the serried rows of headstones lay a thin haze pierced by the occasional obelisk and by the wing tips of marble angels whose disembodied heads seemed to be floating on particles of shimmering light.

And as she watched, motionless in an absorbed enchantment, the mist began to rise and the whole cemetery was revealed to her, a miracle of stone and marble, bright grass and summer-laden trees, flower-bedecked graves and intersecting paths stretching as far as the eye could see. In the distance she could just make out the spire of a Victorian chapel, gleaming like the spire of some magical castle in a long-forgotten fairy tale. In those moments of growing wonder, she found herself shivering with delight, an emotion so rare that it stole through her thin body like a pain. And it was then, on the first morning of her new life, with the past a void and the future unknown and frightening, that she made the cemetery her own. Throughout her childhood and youth it was to remain a place of delight and mystery, her refuge and her solace.

It was a childhood without love, almost without affection. Her Uncle Victor was her father's elder half-brother; that, too, she had been told. He and her aunt weren't really her relations. Their small capacity for love was expended on each other, and even here it was less a positive emotion than a pact of mutual support and comfort against the threatening world that lay outside the trim curtains of their small, claustrophobic sitting room.

But they cared for her as dutifully as she cared for the cat Blackie. It was a fiction in the household that she adored Blackie, her own cat, brought with her when she arrived, her one link with the past, almost her only possession. Only she knew that she disliked and feared him. But she brushed and fed him with conscientious care, as she did everything, and in return he gave her a slavish allegiance, hardly ever leaving her side, slinking through the cemetery at her heels and turning back only when they reached the main gate. But he wasn't her friend. She didn't love him. He was a fellow conspirator, gazing at her through slits of azure light, relishing some secret

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knowledge that was her knowledge, too. He ate voraciously, yet he never grew fat. Instead, his sleek black body lengthened until, stretched in the sunlight along her windowsill, his sharp nose turned always to the cemetery, he looked as sinister and unnatural as a furred reptile.

It was lucky for her that there was a side gate to the cemetery from Alma Terrace and that she could take a shortcut to and from school across the graveyard, avoiding the dangers of the main road. On her first morning, her uncle had said doubtfully, "I suppose it's all right. But it seems wrong, somehow, a child walking every day through rows of the dead."

Her aunt had replied: "The dead can't rise from their graves. They lie quiet. She's safe enough from the dead."

Her voice had been unnaturally gruff and loud. The words had sounded like an assertion, almost a defiance. But the child knew her aunt was right. She did feel safe with the dead—safe and at home.

The years in Alma Terrace slipped by, as bland and dull as her aunt's blanc mange, a sensation rather than a taste. Was she happy? That was a question it had never occurred to her to ask. She wasn't unpopular at school, being neither pretty nor intelligent enough to provoke much interest either from the children or the staff; an ordinary child, unusual only in that she was an orphan, but unable to capitalize even on that sentimental advantage. Perhaps she might have found friends—quiet, unenterprising children like her, who would respond to her unthreatening mediocrity—but something about her repelled their timid advances; her self-sufficiency, the bland, uncaring gaze, the refusal to give anything of herself even in casual friendship. She didn't need friends. She had the graveyard and its occupants.

She had her favorites. She knew them all—when they had died, how old they had been, sometimes how they had died. She knew their names and learned their memorials by heart. They were more real to her than the living, those rows of dearly loved wives and mothers, respected tradesmen, lamented fathers, deeply mourned children.

The new graves hardly ever interested her, although she would watch the funerals from a distance and creep up later to read the mourning cards. What she liked best were the old, neglected oblongs of mounded earth or chipped stones, the tilted crosses, the carved

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words almost erased by time. It was around the names of the long dead that she wove her childish fantasies.

Even the seasons of the year she experienced in and through the cemetery. The gold and purple spears of the first crocuses thrusting through the hard earth. April with its tossing daffodils. The whole graveyard *en fete* in yellow and white as mourners dressed the graves for Easter. The smell of mown grass and the earthy tang of high summer, as if the dead were breathing the flower-scented air and exuding their own mysterious miasma. The glare of sunlight on stone and marble as the old women in their stained cotton dresses shuffled with their vases to fill them at the tap behind the chapel. Seeing the cemetery transformed by the first snow of winter, the marble angels grotesque in their high bonnets of glistening snow. Watching at her window for the thaw, hoping to catch that moment when the edifice would slip and the shrouded shapes become themselves again.

Only once had she asked about her father, and then she had known, as children do, that this was a subject which, for some mysterious adult reason, it was better not to talk about. She had been sitting at the kitchen table with her homework while her aunt was busy cooking supper. Looking up from her history book, she asked: "Where is Daddy buried?"

The frying pan clattered against the stove. The cooking fork dropped from her aunt's hand. It took her a long time to pick it up, wash it, clean the grease from the floor. The child asked once again: "Where is Daddy buried?"

"Up north. At Creedon, outside Nottingham, with your mum and gran. Where else?"

"Can I go there? Can I visit him?"

"When you're older, maybe. No sense, is there, hanging about graves? The dead aren't there."

"Who looks after them?"

"The graves? The cemetery people. Now get on with your homework."

She hadn't asked about her mother, the mother who died when she was born. That desertion had always seemed to her willful, a source of secret guilt. "You killed your mother." Someone sometime had spoken those words to her, had laid on her that burden. She wouldn't let herself think about her mother. But she knew that her father had stayed with her, had loved her, hadn't wanted to die and

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leave her. Someday, secretly, she would find his grave. She would visit it, not once, but every week. She would tend it and plant flowers on it and clip the grass as the old ladies did in the cemetery. And if there wasn't a stone, she would pay for one, bearing his name and an epitaph she would choose. She would have to wait until she was older, until she could leave school and go to work and save enough money. But one day she would find her father. She would have a grave of her own to visit and tend. There was a debt of love to be paid.

Four years after her arrival in Alma Terrace, her aunt's only brother came to visit from Australia. Physically, he and his sister were alike, the same stolid, short-legged bodies, the same small eyes set in square, pudgy faces. But Uncle Ned had a brash assurance, a cheerful geniality that was so alien to his sister's unconfident reserve that it was hard to believe they were siblings. For two weeks he dominated the little house with his strident, alien voice and assertive masculinity. There were unfamiliar treats, dinners in the West End, a show at Earl's Court. He was kind to the child, tipping her lavishly, even walking through the cemetery with her one morning on his way to buy his racing paper. And it was that evening, coming silently down the stairs to supper, that she overheard disjointed scraps of conversation, adult talk, incomprehensible at the time but taken into her mind and stored there.

First the harsh boom of her uncle's voice: "We were looking at this gravestone together, see. 'Beloved husband and father. Taken from us suddenly on 14 March 1892.' Something like that. Marble chips, cracked urn, bloody great angel pointing upward. You know the kind of thing. Then the kid turned to me. 'Daddy's death was sudden, too.' That's what she said. Came out with it cool as you please. Now what in God's name made her say that? It gave me a turn, I can tell you. I didn't know where to put my face. And what a place to choose, the bloody cemetery. I'll say one thing for coming out to St. Kilda—you'll get a better view, I can promise you that."

Creeping closer, she strained her ears vainly to catch the indistinct mutter of her aunt's reply. Then came her uncle's voice again: "That old bitch never forgave him for getting Helen pregnant. No one was good enough for her precious only daughter. And then when Helen died having the kid, she blamed him for that, too. Poor sod. Sidney bought a packet of trouble when he set eyes on that girl."

Again the murmur of indistinguishable voices, the sound of her

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aunt's footsteps moving from table to stove, the scrape of a chair. Then her Uncle Ned's voice again: "Funny kid, isn't she? Old-fashioned. Morbid, you might say. Seems to live in that boneyard, she and that damned cat. And the spitting image of her dad.

"It turned me up, I can tell you. Looking at me with his eyes and then coming out with it: 'Daddy's death was sudden, too.' I'll say it was! Helps having such an ordinary name, I suppose. People don't catch on. How long ago? Four years? It seems longer."

Only one part of this half heard, incomprehensible conversation had disturbed her. Uncle Ned was trying to persuade them to join him in Australia. She might be taken away from Alma Terrace, might never see the cemetery again, might have to wait for years before she could save enough money to return to England and find her father's grave. And how could she visit it regularly, how could she tend and care for it, from the other side of the world? After Uncle Ned's visit ended, it was months before she could see one of his rare letters with the Australian stamp drop through the letterbox without feeling the cold clutch of fear at her heart.

She needn't have worried. It was October of 1966 before they left England, and they went alone. When they broke the news to her one Sunday morning at breakfast, it was apparent that they had never even considered taking her with them. Dutiful as ever, they had waited to make their decision until she had left school and was earning her living as a shorthand typist with a local firm of estate agents. Her future was assured. They had done all that conscience required of them. Hesitant and a little shamefaced, they justified their decision as if they believed that it was important to her. Her aunt's arthritis was increasingly troublesome; they longed for the sun; Uncle Ned was their only close relation and none of them was getting any younger. Their plan, over which they had agonized for months in whispers behind closed doors, was to visit St. Kilda for six months and then, if they liked Australia, to apply to emigrate. The house in Alma Terrace was to be sold to pay the air fare. It was already on the market. But they had made provision for her.

When they told her what had been arranged, she had to bend her face low over her plate lest the flood of joy be too apparent. Mrs. Morgan, three doors down, would be glad to take her as a lodger if she didn't mind having the small bedroom at the back overlooking the cemetery. In the surging tumult of relief, she hardly heard her aunt's next words. Everyone knew how Mrs. Morgan was about cats.

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Blackie would have to be put to sleep. She was to move into 43 Alma Terrace on the afternoon of the day on which her aunt and uncle flew from Heathrow. Her two cases, holding all that she possessed in the world, were already packed. In her handbag she carefully stowed the meager official confirmations of her existence: her birth certificate, her medical card, her Post Office savings book showing the £103 painstakingly saved toward the cost of her father's memorial. The next day she would begin her search. But first she took Blackie to the veterinarian to be destroyed. She had made a cat box and sat patiently in the waiting room with the box at her feet. The cat made no sound, and this patient resignation touched her, evoking for the first time a spasm of pity and affection. But there was nothing she could do to save him. They both knew it. But then it seemed he had always known what she was thinking, what was past and what was to come. There was something they shared, some knowledge, some common experience she couldn't remember and he couldn't express. Now, with his destruction, even that tenuous link with her first ten years would go forever.

When it was her turn to go into the surgery, she said, "I want him put to sleep."

The veterinarian passed his strong, experienced hands over the sleek fur. "Are you sure? He seems healthy still. He's old, of course, but in remarkably good condition."

"I'm sure. I want him put to sleep."

And she left him there without a glance or another word.

She had thought that she would be glad to be free of the pretense of loving him, free of those slitted, accusing eyes. But as she walked back to Alma Terrace, she found herself crying; tears, unbidden and unstoppable, ran like rain down her face.

There was no difficulty in getting a week's leave from her job; she had been husbanding her holiday entitlement. Her work, as always, was up to date. She had calculated how much money she would need for her train and bus fares and for a week's stay in modest hotels. Her plans had been made. They had been made for years.

She would begin her search with the address on her birth certificate—Cranston House, Creedon, Nottingham, the house where she was born. The present owners might remember her father and her. If not, there would be neighbors or older inhabitants of the village who would be able to recall her father's death, where he was buried. If that failed, she would try the local undertakers. It was, after all,

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only ten years ago. Someone would remember. Somewhere in Nottingham there would be a record of burials. She told Mrs. Morgan that she was taking a week's holiday to visit her father's old home, packed a holdall with necessities, and next morning caught the earliest possible train to Nottingham.

It was during the bus ride from Nottingham to Creedon that she felt the first stirrings of anxiety and mistrust. Until then, she had traveled in calm confidence, but strangely without excitement, as if this long-planned journey were as natural and inevitable as her daily walk to work, an inescapable pilgrimage ordained from that moment when a barefoot child in her white nightdress drew back her bedroom curtains and saw her kingdom spread beneath her. But now her mood changed. As the bus lurched through the suburbs, she found herself shifting in her seat as if mental unease were provoking physical discomfort. She had expected green countryside, small churches guarding neat, domestic graveyards patterned with yew trees. These were graveyards she had visited on holidays, had loved almost as much as she loved the one she had made her own. Surely it was in such bird-loud, sanctified peace that her father lay.

But Nottingham had spread out during the past ten years, and Creedon was now little more than an urban village separated from the city by a ribbon development of brash new houses, petrol stations, and parades of shops. Nothing was familiar, and yet she knew that she had traveled this road before and traveled it in anxiety and pain.

When, thirty minutes later, the bus stopped at its terminus at Creedon, she knew at once where she was. The Dog and Whistle still stood at one corner of the dusty, litter-strewn village green with the same bus shelter outside it. And at the sight of its graffiti-scrawled walls, memory returned as if nothing had ever been forgotten. Here her father used to leave her when he brought her to pay her regular Sunday visits to her grandmother. Here her grandmother's elderly cook would be waiting for her. Here she would look back for a final wave and see her father patiently waiting for the bus to begin its return journey. Here she would be brought at 6:30, when he arrived to collect her. Cranston House was where her grandmother lived. She herself had been born there but it had never been her home.

She had no need to ask her way to the house. And when, five minutes later, she stood gazing up at it in appalled fascination, no

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need to read the name painted on the shabby, padlocked gate. It was a square-built home of dark brick standing in incongruous and spurious grandeur at the end of a country lane. It was smaller than she remembered, but it was still a dreadful house. How could she ever have forgotten those ornate overhanging gables, the high-pitched roof, the secretive oriel windows, the single forbidding turret at the east end?

There was an estate agent's board wired to the gate; the house itself was empty. The paint on the front door was peeling, the lawns were overgrown, the boughs of the rhododendron bushes were broken and the gravel path was studded with weeds. There was no one here who could help her to find her father's grave. But she knew that she had to visit, had to make herself pass again through that intimidating front door. There was something the house knew and had to tell her, something Blackie had known. She couldn't escape her next step. She must find the estate agent's office and get a permit to view.

She had missed the returning bus, and by the time the next one had reached Nottingham, it was after three. Although she had eaten nothing since her early breakfast, she was too driven now to be aware of hunger. But she knew that it would be a long day and that she ought to eat. She turned into a coffee bar and had a toasted cheese sandwich and a mug of coffee, grudging the few minutes it took to gulp them down. The coffee was hot and almost tasteless, but she realized as the hot liquid stung her throat how much she had needed it.

The girl at the cash desk was able to direct her to the house agent's office, a ten minutes' walk away. She was received by a sharp-featured young man in a pinstripe suit who, after one practiced glance at her old blue-tweed coat, the cheap holdall, and bag of synthetic leather, placed her precisely in his private category of client from whom little could be expected and to whom less needed to be given.

But he found the particulars for her, and his curiosity sharpened as she merely glanced at them and then folded the paper away in her bag. Her request to view that afternoon was received, as she had expected, with politeness but without enthusiasm. But this was familiar territory and she knew why. The house was unoccupied. She would have to be escorted. There was nothing in her respectable drabness to suggest that she was a likely purchaser. And when he briefly excused himself to consult a colleague and returned to say that he would drive her to Creedon at once, she knew the probable

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reason for that, too. The office wasn't busy and it was time that someone from the firm checked up on the property.

Neither of them spoke during the drive. When they reached Creedon and he turned down the lane to the house, the apprehension she had felt on her first visit returned, only it was deeper and stronger. Now it was more than the memory of an old wretchedness. This was childhood misery and fear relived, and intensified by a dreadful adult foreboding.

The house agent parked his Morris on the grassy verge, and as she looked up at the blind windows she was seized by a spasm of terror so acute that momentarily she was unable to speak or move. She was aware of the man's holding open the door for her, of the smell of beer on his breath, of his face, uncomfortably close, bending on her a look of exasperated patience. She wanted to say that she had changed her mind, that the house was totally wrong for her, that there would be no point in viewing it, that she would wait for him in the car. But she willed herself to rise from the warm seat and scrambled out under his supercilious eyes. She waited in silence as he unlocked the padlock and swung open the gate.

They passed together between the neglected lawns and the spreading rhododendron bushes toward the front door. And suddenly the feet shuffling on the gravel beside her were different feet and she knew that she was walking with her father as she had walked in childhood. She had only to stretch out her hand to feel the grasp of his fingers. Her companion was saying something about the house, but she didn't hear. The meaningless chatter faded and she heard a different voice, her father's voice, heard for the first time in over ten years:

"It won't be for always, darling. Just until I've found a job. And I'll visit you every Sunday for lunch. Afterward we'll be able to go for a walk together, just the two of us. Grannie has promised that. And I'll buy you a kitten. I'm sure Grannie won't mind when she sees him. A black kitten. You've always wanted a black kitten. What shall we call him? Little Blackie? He'll remind you of me. And then when I've found a job, I'll be able to rent a little house and we'll be together again. I'll look after you, my darling. We'll look after each other."

She dared not look up lest she see again those desperately pleading eyes begging her to understand, to make things easy for him, not to despise him. She knew now that she ought to have helped him, to have told him that she understood, that she didn't mind living

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with Grannie for a month or so, that everything would be all right. But she hadn't managed so adult a response. She remembered tears, desperately clinging to his coat, her grandmother's old cook, tight-lipped, pulling her away from him and bearing her up to bed. And the last memory was of watching him from her room above the porch, of his drooping, defeated figure making its way down the lane to the bus stop.

As they reached the front door, she looked up. The window was still there. Of course it was. She knew every room in this dark house.

The garden was bathed in a mellow October sunlight, yet the hall struck cold and dim. The heavy mahogany staircase led up from gloom to a darkness which hung above them like a weight. The estate agent felt along the wall for the light switch. She didn't wait. She felt again the huge brass doorknob that her childish fingers had hardly encompassed and moved unerringly into the drawing room.

The smell of the room was different. Then there had been a scent of violets overlaid with furniture polish. Now the air smelled cold and musty. She stood in the darkness, shivering but perfectly calm. It seemed to her that she had passed through a barrier of fear as a tortured victim might pass through a pain barrier into a kind of peace. She felt a shoulder brush against her as the man went across to the window and swung open the heavy curtains.

He said, "The last owners have left it partly furnished. Looks better that way. Easier to get offers if the place looks lived in."

"Has there been an offer?"

"Not yet. It's not everyone's cup of tea. Bit on the large side for a modern family. Then, too, there's the murder. Ten years ago, but people still talk. There've been four owners since, and none of them stayed long. It's bound to affect the price. No good thinking you can hush up murder."

His voice was carefully nonchalant but his gaze never left her face. Walking to the empty firegrate, he stretched one arm along the mantelpiece and followed her with his eyes as she moved trance-like about the room. She heard herself asking: "What murder?"

"A sixty-four-year-old woman. Battered to death by her son-in-law. The old cook came in from the back kitchen and found him with the poker in his hand. Come to think of it, it could have been one like that."

He nodded at the collection of brass fire irons resting against the fender. He said, "It happened right where you're standing now. She was sitting in that very chair."

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She said in a voice so gruff and harsh that she hardly recognized it: "It wasn't this chair. It was bigger. Her chair had an embroidered seat and back and there were armrests edged with crochet and the feet were like lions' claws."

His gaze sharpened. Then he laughed warily. The watchful eyes grew puzzled, then the look changed into something else. Could it have been contempt?

"So you know about it. You're one of those."

"One of those?"

"You aren't really in the market for a place. Couldn't afford one this size, anyway. You just want a thrill, want to see where it happened. You get all sorts in this game and I can usually tell. I can give you all the gory details you're interested in. Not that there was much gore. The skull was smashed, but most of the bleeding was internal. They say there was just a trickle falling down her forehead and dripping onto her hands."

It came out so pat that she knew he had told it all before, he enjoyed telling it, this small recital of horror to titillate his clients and relieve the boredom of his day. She wished she weren't so cold. If only she could get warm again, her voice wouldn't sound so strange. She said through her dry lips: "And the kitten. Tell me about the kitten."

"Now, that was something! That was a touch of horror. The kitten was on her lap, licking up the blood. But then, you know, don't you. You've heard all about it."

"Yes," she lied. "I heard all about it." But she had done more than that. She knew. She had seen it. She had been there.

And then the outline of the chair before her altered. An amorphous black shape swam before her eyes; then it took form and substance. Her grandmother was sitting there, squat as a toad, dressed in her Sunday black for morning service, gloved and hatted, prayerbook in her lap. She saw again the glob of phlegm at the corner of the mouth, the thread of broken veins at the side of the sharp nose. The grandmother was waiting to inspect her grandchild before church, turning on her again that look of querulous discontent. The witch was sitting there. The witch who hated her and her daddy, who had told her that he was useless and feckless and no better than her mother's murderer. The witch who was planning to keep her from her daddy forever. And then she saw something else. The poker was there, too, just as she remembered it, the long rod of polished brass with its heavy knob.

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She seized it now as she had seized it then, and with a high scream of hatred and terror brought it down on her grandmother's head. Again and again she struck, hearing the brass thudding against the leather, blow on splitting blow. And still she screamed. The room rang with the terror of it. But it was only when the frenzy passed and the dreadful noise stopped that she knew from the pain in her throat that the screaming had been hers.

She stood shaking, gasping for breath. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead and she felt the stinging drops seeping into her eyes. Looking up, she was aware of the estate man's eyes, wide with terror, staring into hers, of a muttered curse, of footsteps running to the door. And then the poker slid from her moist hands and she heard it thud softly on the rug.

He had been right: there was no blood. Only the grotesque hat knocked forward over the dead face. But while she watched, a sluggish line of deep red rolled from under the brim, zigzagged down the forehead, trickled along the creases of the cheeks, and began to drop steadily onto the gloved hands. And then she heard a soft mew. A ball of black fur crept from behind the chair and the ghost of Blackie, azure eyes frantic, leaped, as he had leaped ten years earlier, delicately into that unmoving lap.

She looked at her hands. Where were the gloves, the white-cotton gloves that the witch had always insisted must be worn to church? But these hands, no longer the hands of a nine-yeàr-old child, were naked. And the chair was empty. There was nothing but the split leather, the burst of horsehair stuffing, a faint smell of violets fading on the quiet air.

She walked out the front door without closing it behind her as she had left it then. She walked as she had walked then, gloved and unsullied, down the gravel path between the rhododendrons, through the ironwork gate, and up the lane toward the church. The bell had only just started ringing; she would be in good time. In the distance she had glimpsed her father climbing a stile from the water meadow into the lane. So he must have set out early after breakfast and had walked to Creedon.

And why so early? Had he needed that long walk to settle something in his mind? Had it been a pathetic attempt to propitiate the witch by coming with them to church? Or—blessed thought—had he come to take her away, to see that her few belongings were packed and ready by the time the service was over? Yes, that was what she

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had thought at the time. She remembered it now, that fountain of hope soaring and dancing into glorious certainty. When she got home, all would be ready. They would stand there together and defy the witch, would tell her that they were leaving together, the two of them and Blackie, that she would never see them again. At the end of the road, she looked back and saw for the last time the beloved ghost, crossing the lane to the house toward that fatally open door.

And after that? The vision was fading now. She could remember nothing of the service except a blaze of red and blue shifting like a kaleidoscope, then fusing into stained-glass window, the Good Shepherd gathering a lamb to his bosom. And afterward? Surely there had been strangers waiting on the porch, grave, concerned faces, whispers and sidelong glances, a woman in some kind of uniform, an official car. And after that, nothing. Memory was a blank.

But now at last she knew where her father was buried. And she knew why she would never be able to visit him, never make that pious pilgrimage to the place where he lay because of her, the shameful place where she had put him. There could be no flowers, no obelisk, no loving message carved in marble for those who lay in quicklime behind a prison wall. And then, unbidden, came the final memory. She saw again the open church door, the trickle of congregation filing in, inquiring faces turning toward her as she arrived alone in the vestibule. She heard again that high, childish voice speaking the words that more than any others had slipped the rope of hemp over his shrouded head.

"Granny? She isn't very well. She told me to come on my own. No, there's nothing to worry about. She's quite all right. Daddy's with her."

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Lily's voice was delightfully husky and virginally delicate as she improvised the speech from The Shop Around the Corner. *She kept it brief, and when she was finished there was defiance in her face, a defiance that dared him to tell her she wasn't any good.*

Sam said, "On the nose, babe."

She was glowing. "Really? You really liked it?"

"I'd like to see more. I'd like to see your whole repertory."

She imitated Jimmy Durante. "I got a million of 'em—a million *of 'em . . . "*

ANY RESEMBLANCE LIVING OR DEAD

by GEORGE BAXT

Lila Tyler placed the bowl of piping-hot split-pea soup in front of the man and he sniffed its magnificent aroma with exaggerated passion. He said to Lila, "This soup is almost as hot and tasty as you are."

"You say that every time you lunch here. Don't you get tired of hearing that line over and over again? I know I do." She put him down with a smile. It was a lovely smile and it usually won her a decent tip.

"What's your name—" *shlurp* "—cutie?"

"Lila."

"Lila—" *shlurp* "—what?"

"Lila Tyler."

He sat back and enjoyed her voluptuous body. "And you came to La La Land to become a big moomie-picture star."

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"I came to Hollywood because this is the place to get started."

"Can you—" *shlurp* "—act?"

"They said I could back in Dropout, New Jersey. That's where I come from."

"How long you—" *shlurp* "—been here?"

"Three months."

He pushed the plate to one side, dabbed daintily at his mouth with his napkin, and drummed on the tabletop with his fingers. "You know who I am?"

"Everybody knows who you are. You're Sam Glockenspiel, the agent."

"The very powerful agent. I'm a big man in this town. Didn't your informant tell you?"

"My informant is the hatcheck girl, and where she comes from only Julio Iglesias is powerful."

Sam chuckled. "I like your delivery. It's nice. It's dry. You got an unusual voice, too—kind of like Margaret Sullavan's. You ever hear of her?"

"Oh, yes—I've seen lots of her pictures on the tube. I do a great impersonation of her."

"You do impersonations?"

She nodded. "I think I'm pretty good."

"Let me hear Sullavan."

"Here? Now?"

"Why not? It's late. There's nobody left but us and that fat couple at the other end of the room. Go ahead, audition for me. You're lucky—I'm a hard man to get to."

Lila looked around the room. The manager was nowhere in sight. She hoped he was in his office demolishing a late lunch and maybe one of the waitresses. She lowered her head, deep in concentration. After about twenty seconds, her head flew up, her eyes widened, she cocked her head, staring straight ahead at nothing, and she became Margaret Sullavan. "Dear friend, dear dear friend, how I loved your letter I received this morning—" The voice was delightfully husky and virginally delicate as she improvised the speech from *The Shop Around the Corner*. She kept it brief, and when she was finished there was defiance in her face, a defiance that dared him to tell her she wasn't any good.

Sam said, "On the nose, babe."

She was glowing. "Really? You really liked it?"

"I'd like to see more. I'd like to see your whole repertory."

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She imitated Jimmy Durante. "I got a million of 'em—a *million* of 'em."

He extracted a card case from his inside jacket pocket and selected a card for her. "That's my office address. What time do you quit here?"

"I finish at four. I only work three lunch shifts a week. I need the time to make the rounds."

"That enough to eat on?"

"They feed me here."

"What about a roof over your head?"

"I share in West Hollywood with two girls. We sometimes get along."

"My office is around the corner on Wilshire. Come up when you're finished here. I think I just might be able to do something for you." He moved to leave.

"Don't you want anything else to eat?"

"The truth is, Lila, I already had my lunch. I ate with Martin Scorsese and Michelle Pfeiffer. I'm working on a ten-million-dollar deal for them." He was pleased to see her chin drop. "I really came here to see you, but the split-pea soup was okay, too. The first time I laid eyes on you, I had a hunch about you. See you in a couple of hours, cutie." He patted her cheek gently, dropped a five-dollar bill on the table to cover the soup and her tip, and left.

As a bus boy swooped down on her station to clear the table, Lila pocketed the bill and hurried to confer with Juana, the hatcheck girl who was also one of her roommates.

Juana impaled her with her eyes. "You be careful, kid. I'm wise to these sharpies around here. Don't trust any of them."

"I know, I know. But how will I get anywhere if I don't trust people?"

"Look, kid—if you got something, it'll get you there, wherever there is. But in this town, there's pussycats like you and hawks like Glockenspiel. You gotta be cautious. Like walking on eggshells."

"I'll be perfectly safe in his office. After all, his staff will be there."

"What staff?"

"If he's a big-time agent, he has to have a secretary and a receptionist and an office boy."

"And eight pair of hands."

"You're such a cynic."

"Kid, I been around this town a long time. Take it from an old campaigner, watch your step and don't stop taking the pill . . ."

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Sam Glockenspiel's office on Wilshire Boulevard was modest by the usual show-business standards, but he did have a secretary who was also his receptionist, office girl, and coffee brewer. Gladys Atkins was a buxom woman in her mid-forties, twice widowed and childless, who hennaed her hair and wore dresses one size too tight for her. Sam paid her a decent salary and made her privy to his indecent schemes.

"If she's got no talent, why are you bothering?"

"Wait till you see the body on her. You know I can't resist them when they're built."

"Be nice for a change, Sam. Don't break the kid's heart."

"I'm not going to break her heart—only her resistance. Now be a good girl and when I ask her to do a few shticks for you, you make like you're watching the ninth wonder of the world."

"*Sam!* You know I have a hard time keeping a straight face!"

"So keep a gay one," he said, dialing a number. Gladys clucked her tongue and shook her head woefully as she returned to her desk in the outer office.

As she shut the door behind her, she heard him asking for Bunny Travis, casting director of a syndicated program that spotlighted amateur talent, *Show Your Stuff.*

"Bunny? It's old Glockenspiel. Listen, Bunny, I don't often call in my markers, but this is special. I got this here kid on the string. She does impersonations."

Bunny Travis cast a heaven-help-me look at the ceiling. "Sam, not another one of those poor slobs."

"But, Bunny, this one's really built. I gotta make it with her. Just thinking about her keeps me awake nights."

"What's her name?"

Sam told him.

"Lila Tyler. Wait a minute." He referred to his appointment book. "I can see her tomorrow around five."

"Now just a second, Bunny, let's not be *too* hasty. I need time to work with the kid. Make it a week from tomorrow at five."

"Don't any of these poor innocents take a shot at you?"

"Nah. I get them the appointment, right? They get their chance, right? It's my fault they don't get the job? I'll love you forever for this, Bun."

The casting director made a nasty face at the phone. "There are three deadly things in this world deserving of extermination. AIDS, mothers, and Sam Glockenspiel."

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Sam cackled and hung up. He looked at his wristwatch, made a few phonecalls to try to drum up work for some of his clients, a few of which were talented, and then settled back to await Lila Tyler.

The lamb to the slaughter, thought Gladys Atkins as Lila entered the office. But Sam sure could pick them. Hers was a body that sang on key. The face was all right, too, but in this town it was condemned by its innocence.

Gladys said briskly and efficiently, "Lila Tyler?"

Lila smiled and Gladys felt her heart breaking. Poor kid. Poor, sad, beautiful, innocent kid. "Mr. Glockenspiel is expecting me."

"Indeed he is, dear." Gladys crossed to Sam's office. "I'll tell him you're here." She opened the door and announced Lila. Sam came to the door, flung it wide open, and stretched out his hands to Lila.

"Lila! Lila! Lila! Come right in. You, too, Gladys—I want you to see what Lila can do."

Gladys followed Lila into the office. Sam sat behind his desk. Gladys sat in a chair and Lila on the couch. Isn't it marvelous, thought Gladys, how actresses instinctively make it to the couch. Lila looked at the autographed photographs that constituted Glockenspiel's rogues gallery of clients. She recognized nobody.

"Gladys, Lila's phenomenal." Gladys found a small smile which took a Herculean effort. Sam said to Lila, "I told Gladys about your Sullavan and Durante. Now show us some others."

"I'd love to." Lila wondered where the rest of the personnel were housed while she put her purse aside, arose, and walked to an area equidistant between Sam and Gladys.

Gladys reared back as Lila, face contorted, lunged toward her. "Yes, yes, yes! Helenius bought me everything! Everything! Do you hear me, Helenius bought me this!" She slammed her hand down on the chair's armrest. She stalked to Sam's desk and hit it hard with her fist. "And Helenius bought me this! He bought everything! He bought *me!* Yes! Helenius bought *me!*"

"Bette Davis!" cried Sam. The name Helenius triggered it for him. Claude Rains had played Helenius opposite Bette Davis in *Deception*. "Go ahead, kid, do another one."

Lila screwed up her face, scratched her head, and began wailing mercilessly. "Oh, Ollie, I didn't mean to drop the brick on your big toe!" She puffed out her cheeks and pantomimed flipping a tie hanging from her neck. "And another fine mess you've gotten us into—I can't take you anywhere!"

"Oh, Ollie, what'll we tell our wives?"

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Gladys felt her eyes crossing as Lila darted from Stan to Ollie and back again. Laurel and Hardy were favorites of hers and what was going on before her eyes was a sacrilege.

"Can I do one more?" asked Lila, now off and running and relishing having the racetrack all to herself. She narrowed her eyes, found a sexy smile, and sauntered slowly toward Sam. "So, Destwy, youw're a fewocious cowboy, eh? Youw're the best woper and the best wider in the West, eh, Womeo?" She sang "See What the Boys in the Backroom Will Have" as Gladys suppressed a shriek. When she finished, Sam and Gladys applauded.

Sam leapt nimbly from behind his desk and before Lila could dodge to safety enveloped her in a crushing bearhug. "Lila baby, you've *got* it! You're *terrific!* Ain't she a sensation, Gladys?"

Gladys said, "I didn't think she had it in her."

Sam said triumphantly, "I'm going to get you an audition for *Show Your Stuff*."

Lila thought she would faint. Gladys steered her back to the couch and then excused herself, discreetly shutting the door behind her. Lila watched bug-eyed as Sam conversed with Bunny. "A week from tomorrow at five should be good. Wait a minute, I've got Lila right here. Lila, does a week from tomorrow at five fit your schedule?" He winked at Lila and she nodded her head enthusiastically. "That's a date, Bunny. It's written by lightning in concrete! Love ya, Bunny boy." He slammed the phone down and rubbed his hands together greedily. "Now you listen, Lila. Between now and next week, we're going to work together to polish up your act. You got some rough edges that need smoothing. I'd skip the Laurel and Hardy—"

"Didn't you like it?"

"Loved it, but teams are a tough impersonation for a single performer. Do you do Mae West?"

"To a turn," said Lila brightly.

"I thought you would! Now then, let's work on a rehearsal schedule. It'll have to be mostly nights—I have a business to run, after all." He blew her a kiss. "God, but I'm proud of you!"

"Thank you. I'm so grateful."

Lila wished he wouldn't wink so much. It made her nervous. Maybe it was a nervous disorder.

She heard him asking, "How about we start tonight?" and she heard herself say, "No time like the present." And then she told him she wanted to go home and change. He wrote his home address and

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phone number on a slip of paper and she promised to be there promptly at eight.

As Sam Glockenspiel later told the story at the Lamb's Club, the seduction of Lila Tyler made her sound like the easiest mark in town. Lila herself couldn't understand how she came to permit herself to be so easily seduced. Was it the champagne, the Chinese food eaten out of soggy cartons, the brandies that followed, or the fact that for some peculiar reason she found Sam Glockenspiel sexy? And in bed, he certainly wasn't the fumbling callow youths of Dropout, New Jersey, who thought it sexy to recite baseball scores in her ear.

"I think I'm in love with Sam Glockenspiel," Lila confided to Juana the hatcheck girl the day before her scheduled appointment with Bunny Travis.

"Well," said Juana with a sigh, "I suppose he's not all that bad-looking. And I'm sure he knows his way around a mattress. You haven't told him, have you?"

"I'm too shy."

"Thank God."

"I want him to be the Svengali to my Trilby."

"Who? Is that a new rock act?"

"You're making fun of me."

"No, I'm not, sweetie. I just hate to see you getting hurt. You're a babe in the woods and Glockenspiel's a shark."

"I can handle him, Juana, I know I can."

"That's what my aunt said about my uncle before he deposited her in the loony bin. Oh, never mind, kid. Good luck tomorrow."

Lila asked eagerly, "Do you want to see some more impersonations?"

Juana paled. Her mouth went dry. Her hands trembled. She managed to say, "Not right now. I got to count up my take before the night girl takes over." Lila smiled her enchanting smile, said, "Ciao," and went home to bathe and scent herself before going to Sam's place for some more "rehearsals."

The next day, Lila and Sam arrived at Bunny Travis's office promptly at five. Travis kept them waiting only half an hour before they were ushered into his office. Sam patted Lila's hand and winked and Lila felt a surge of confidence. Bunny looked at the girl and wanted to cry. The poor kid.

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Sam said to Lila, "Okay, darling. Do our favorite."

Lila wrapped her arms around herself, her eyelids drooped, and she shattered the room with a wracking cough. Bunny refrained from ducking behind the desk. "Armand, Armand," whispered Lila between coughs, "it is growing darker, Armand. Where are you? I want to kiss your lips for one last time—"

The agony continued for three minutes. Then Lila did a little time step, looked into nobody's big blue eyes, and said in what was almost Ruby Keeler's lifeless voice, "Oh, Jim, I didn't know *you'd* be here—" followed by a horrendous chorus of "Shuffle Off to Buffalo."

Ten minutes and three more deadly impersonations (Ethel Barrymore, Judy Garland, and Edna Mae Oliver) later, Bunny Travis ushered Lila and Sam out of his office, profuse with his "Thank yous" and "I'll be in touches." After they left, his secretary, seeing the distress in Travis's face, asked with alarm, "Boss, what's wrong?"

"My God, I need oxygen!" he said.

Fifteen minutes later, in Sam's car, Lila pleaded, "Do you really think he liked me?"

"Take it from me, babe, he'll never be the same."

"Oh, I feel like singing!"

"Please don't. You have to conserve your energy. You've got a big future ahead of you."

Lila didn't hear from Sam the next day. When she phoned the office, Gladys told her Sam had had to fly to New York to settle a Broadway deal for a client.

"Did he hear from Mr. Travis, Gladys?"

"Um—Mr. Travis said the season's fully booked, but he has you down for next year."

"*Next* year?"

"Lila—I'll have Sam call you when he gets back."

Six weeks later, Lila began to smell a rat. She said to Juana, "I think Sam Glockenspiel is avoiding me."

Juana said in a worldly tone of voice, "I warned you, honey."

"I've been had."

"You're not alone, babe."

In the weeks that followed, Lila brooded, lost weight, and almost lost her job. Glockenspiel never came to the restaurant again. When

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she mentioned his name to other girls she met, most of them raised an eyebrow and made an uncomplimentary comment (or one not fit to be printed in a family magazine). For a while, Lila took to her bed, weeping bitterly, inconsolable until finally one day she came to a decision that would alter the rest of her life. Even the folks back in Dropout, New Jersey, would have a shocking surprise in store for them.

One day a few months later, Gladys was surprised to hear Lila's voice on the phone. She thought she'd heard the last of her. "I've got a wonderful new routine I think will excite Sam! I tried it out at the Comedy Club's guest-comedian night," Lila lied, "and I absolutely tore the house down. Would you please ask Sam to see me? I think I'm onto something terrific. You know, where I come from bygones are bygones. I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for Sam."

Gladys was genuinely touched. Lila was a good kid and she told that to Sam. He thought for a moment. Hunting hadn't been so good of late and Lila had been a terrific protegee. "Oh, what the hell," he said after some brief soul-searching, "tell her to come in late tomorrow afternoon."

Lila arrived at five the next day, warmly greeting Gladys. After Gladys ushered her into Sam's office, Lila asked Gladys if she would mind leaving them. She said with a marked insinuation, "I'm not ready for women to see my new act." Gladys departed gratefully.

"Lila, you're lovelier than ever," said Sam. "What have you got in that big totebag of yours?"

"My props," she explained sweetly.

"Props? My, this sounds very ambitious."

"It is. It took a long time planning."

"Not more impersonations?"

"Oh, no, I've given that up, Sam darling. This is interpretations of infamous women in history."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding." She reached into the totebag and brought out a cup and saucer. She twisted a ring she wore and poured some powder into the cup, then announced proudly, "Lucrezia Borgia!"

Sam was speechless.

"Now get this one." From the tote she took a beret which she fitted to her head, a cigar which she placed in her mouth, and a gun which made Sam nervous. She struck a familiar pose. "Get it?"

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"Oh, sure—Bonnie. Bonnie and Clyde. Where's Clyde? Ha ha!"

"I'll skip to the big number." Sam was grateful for her decision to lean toward brevity. He was embarrassed. He could have kicked himself with a spiked shoe for having consented to see her again. She rummaged in the totebag once again.

In the outer office, Gladys heard Sam cry, "Oh, no!" She rushed into his office just as Lila brought an axe smashing into his skull, announcing, "How about it, Sam? *Lizzie Borden!*"

DETECTIVERSE

THE ROMANTIC

by MICHAEL A. PFLEGER

It's not a question of right or wrong,
It simply must be done—
To boldy state my love to her,
Who faint heart ne'er has won.
I'll woo her with sweet tender words
And thrill to hear her sighs—
The choice is hers alone to make,
She marries me—or dies.

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a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

Peter Turnbull, who has been a steelworker and a crematorium assistant and is currently employed as a social worker, lives in Glasgow, Scotland. His novels include The Claws of the Gryphon, Two Way Cut, Condition Purple, *and his sixth and most recent mystery,* And Did Murder Him *(St. Martin's Press), about the Glasgow Police P Division's investigation into the violent death of a young heroin addict . . .*

BECAUSE YOU'RE A COP

by PETER TURNBULL

It started as a code 10—just an ordinary, twenty-a-day code 10. It was in itself a small incident, hardly reported in the newspaper. Not the big dailies, not even the local evening paper afforded the story room. It did, however, make the Bearsden and Milngavie *Gazette,* "delivered free to your house and supported entirely by advertising revenue." As a few inches of inside-column—filler—it read:

"A local man, George Ryan, 49 years, was attacked and robbed early on Tuesday night. He was taken to Glasgow Royal Infirmary and was discharged after treatment. The incident took place in Buchanan Street at about 7:30 P.M. Police are appealing for witnesses. Any member of the public who may be able to provide information is asked to contact D. C. King of P Division, Police Station, Charing Cross, Glasgow."

Which was about all that needed to be said . . .

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A man in his middle years is walking down a central city street at the quiet time, that time between the smog and crush of the homeward rush hour and the onset of the press of the young and fashionable, click-clicking or swaying with newly discovered masculinity from trendy pub to late-drinking nightspot. A quiet time—a time when a motorist can cross the grid system without stopping, a time when overtime workers stroll home, a time when the occasional man with a problem, either at home or at work, stops on his way from one to the other for a drink—which more often than not becomes two, then three. It's a time, being high summer, when the swallows and the swifts who during the day had darted and hunted close to the ground now dart and hunt two hundred feet above the rooftops, where the flying insects have been pushed by the day's thermal uplift from the baking city.

And on that Tuesday, the swallows and swifts darted and hunted against a background of blue going crimson in the north—this in the eyes of the homeward-strolling overtime worker.

It was not at all the time that a man expects to be mugged.

Richard King had drawn the backshift that week, starting at 5:00 P.M. and finishing he never knew when, but very usually well into the graveyard shift's time, which starts at 1:00 A.M. That particular Tuesday, backshift was quiet. Very quiet. Ray Sussock had nothing at all to hand over to him and went home beaming with satisfaction because he had opened and shut a murder file all within the day shift. It was, though, not so difficult, because the man had shuffled up to the uniform bar, laid a bloody kitchen knife on the polished pinewood surface, and said, blinking with humility, "Excuse me, sir, but I just done me wife in."

"I see, sir," had said the uniform-bar officer. "Will you please come and sit through here? The sergeant will want to have a word with you. No, sir, you can leave that with me."

A call to the address given by the man had indeed revealed a very bloody corpse on the living-room floor. Sussock had finished the charging and the report in time to finish at 5:00 P.M., leaving King with nothing to do.

He did the *Daily Herald* crossword puzzle and then sat with his feet on the desk and watched the sun burn in a scarlet ball and settle on the hills to the northwest, somewhere over Loch Lomond. He picked up the *Daily Herald* again and reread it. He thought about his beautiful Quakeress wife Rosemary and their son Iain. He

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thought of how Rosemary always wore her hair in a bun, how she always wore either skirts or dresses, and how she never wore makeup and never complained.

He thought of how she had asked for shelves, of how he had brought the wood home with which to build her the shelves the previous November, of how he had propped them up in the kitchen, to turn his attention to Iain, and of how there they had remained from that day to this. He thought of how Iain had begun to walk and to gurgle with happiness—

The phone rang.

"D.C. King." He reached for his notepad and pen as he spoke.

"Code 10, sir," said the silk-smooth voice of the switchboard operator. "G.R.I. Tango Delta Foxtrot requests C.I.D. attendance."

"On my way," said Richard King.

"Two or three footsteps."

"Two or three footsteps," Richard King echoed the man's words before he knew what he was saying. He said it out of a sense of despair. "Two or three footsteps is not a lot for us to go on, Mr. Ryan."

"I'm not going to fabricate information for you, sir." George Ryan held a paper towel to his nose, although the bleeding had long since stopped.

"Of course. But still, Mr. Ryan, we need more to go on than that. How many of them were there?"

"Two."

"Young? Old? Men? Women?"

"You have female muggers?"

"You'd better believe it."

"My, my."

Ryan dabbed his nose and winced as he dabbed a little too hard. He was a small man, bald and neatly dressed, but in a manner that suggested he was making ends meet. A wedding band worn proudly spoke of a lady keeping the hearth at home.

"How many?" King pressed. He was dressed in cream-colored slacks and a casual jacket, and wore a tie, despite the heat. Regulations.

"Two," said George Ryan. He had a soft voice, with a certain musical lilt to it. From the islands, King thought, certainly not a native Glaswegian.

"Men?"

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"Aye."

"You didn't see them?"

"Not clearly. I say—"

A nurse came into the cubicle, mumbled an apology as she knelt at a cupboard and took out a packet of gauze, and retreated again, swishing the curtain shut behind her.

"You say—?"

"Oh, aye. I say it was clear enough that they were two men as opposed to two lassies."

"Young?"

"Aye."

"Twenties?"

"Aye—och, aye. They wore those things—jeans." King began to take notes.

"Just ran up behind me, knocked me on the head, kicked me in the face. The doctor said I have a broken nose. They went into my jacket, got my wallet, and were away. I punched one and scratched the other. I drew blood." Ryan held up his hands. "I have strong nails, strong on calcium. I play the guitar."

"The guitar?"

"Aye, it's a lovely instrument. I don't play this bong, bang, yeah yeah rubbish, but the classical guitar. See my nails—protruding on the right hand, cut back on the left?"

King nodded. "So you drew blood?"

"Aye. The guy swore and kicked me. Some of the blood on my shirt is his, his face rubbed against it—I pulled him with my left hand and clawed him deeply with my right."

"Good man."

"Aye, there's life in the old dog yet." Ryan smiled and his eyes glowed warmly.

King grinned. "It would help us if we could keep your shirt, sir. We could get blood samples from it. And we'd like to take swabs from under your fingernails."

"To get the attacker's blood group?"

"Yes, and rather more than that. In fact, in these days of advanced medical science, we can identify a person from his blood, or a flake of his skin, or a piece of hair, or a sample of body fluids."

"My heavens." Ryan dabbed his nose.

"It's a process called genetic fingerprinting."

"Genetic fingerprinting."

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"That's it. Practically foolproof. A microscopic sample of body tissue or fluid is sufficient to identify an individual. The print itself looks like a series of dots and dashes. A bit like a line of Morse code. The chances of two people having the same print—the same order and spacing of dots and dashes—is about one in ten million."

"Ten million to one."

"And that's a conservative estimate. The problem is that the process is expensive, and that's a major consideration in these days of police forces being told to sell their horses to the French to slaughter for meat so as to save pennies. It's really only used in complex murder cases."

"Which this isn't."

"Which it isn't. But we'll take samples, anyway. You see, these felons sound like they've done this before. We might want them for heaven knows what. So if you're fit, sir, we'll go to the police station."

"Sounds worrying."

"Not if you're one of the good guys," King smiled.

He took Ryan to P Division Police Station at Charing Cross. As he drove across the city, darkness was falling. The young and trendy were walking soberly. In a few hours' time, they would be reveling, would have spent money. Many would be drunk. Some would go home in the accompaniment of a strange new body to discover. Some would be taken to hospital, some would be taken to the cells. Glasgow town at night.

In a room in the police station, George Ryan sat at a table and waited. The room was bare and functional and confirmed his idea of what a room in a police station might look like. There was a modern steel table, a chair at each side, a third chair in the corner, a light in the ceiling, a Police Mutual calendar on the wall, a metal filing cabinet in the corner.

Ryan was still in shock, but he felt himself to be coming out of it. He knew his name, he knew his age, he knew where he was and above all he knew what he wanted: he wanted to go home.

The door opened and a man bumbled into the room. Ryan thought that "bumble" was the only word he knew to describe the man. He was big-bodied, small-limbed. He wore spectacles with immensely thick lenses that didn't seem at all in place perched on his fat, flabby-cheeked face—balanced by hair cut so short it resembled a black cap perched on the back of the man's head.

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The man moved awkwardly, turning a full circle in the process of closing the door, and scraped the second chair on the floor as he pulled it toward him from beneath the table. He did not, to Ryan, seem to be a man who was happy with his body. "Mr. Ryan?" He spoke nervously, hesitatingly. He carried a plastic case.

"Yes."

"My name is Bothwell. Forensic Chemist. I've been asked to scrape under your nails."

"Yes," said Ryan. "The officer—"

But Bothwell moved as if disinterested in Ryan's reply. He was a man doing a job he was paid to do, and he did it mechanically and perfunctorily. Ryan wasted no more effort speaking to the bumbling chemist but laid his right hand on the table. Bothwell fumbled and bumbled, opening the case laboriously, freeing one clasp and then the other. He pressed back the lid and took out a shiny red spatula and self-sealing cellophane sachet. He dug deeply under Ryan's nails, ignoring his gasps of discomfort, and scraped the excavated material into the sachet.

"Other hand, please," he said distantly and dismissively. So much so that Ryan wondered if the chemist had difficulty in distinguishing between victim and perpetrator. Ryan placed his left hand on the table.

"I play the guitar," he said by means of explanation. Bothwell grunted and replaced the spatula in the case. He took an inkpad and a sheet of paper marked with two sets of five squares.

"Fingerprints," smiled Ryan.

"That's it," said Bothwell. "If we find your property, we have to know which are your prints and which are the villains'. Simple as that."

Bothwell eventually thanked Ryan for his cooperation and left the room, leaving Ryan once again alone, this time occupying the time by rubbing the ink from his fingertips.

King drove Ryan home. He found that Ryan and his lady lived above the shop. Literally.

Ryan asked King to stop beside a row of small shops. "That's mine," he said proudly, pointing to Ryan's Newsagents under a bright sign, white on red, above the window. It stood between the chemist and the baker's and two down from the sub postoffice. "It's best to park here—we'll walk round the back."

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"Round the back" was a yard, clean-swept as King would have expected, this being Bearsden—a line of dustbins partially hidden from view by a neat brick wall. A flight of stairs led up to a gallery and the front doors of the flats above the shops.

Ryan sprinted up the stairs—agile for his years, observed King, and a man glad to be home. He walked along the gallery with King in his wake and stopped at a lilac-colored door. He slipped a key into the lock and turned it. "Some owners live above the shop like we do," he said as the door swung open. "Others let the flats out."

The flat was in darkness, yet a female voice cried, "George?" The voice had a ring of relief. "George—is that you?"

Ryan switched on the light. "Yes, it's me, dear." King stepped over the threshold, and as he did his nostrils were assaulted by the smell of smoke and fire damage. Ryan walked down a narrow corridor and into a living room, King following. Ryan switched on the light in the room. A woman stood in the center of the room. King saw that she was younger than Ryan, perhaps by about fifteen years. She was neatly dressed in blue. A dog, a golden labrador, sat at her feet. King was amused by the dog's reaction—pleased at Ryan's return, curious about King.

Ryan and the woman hugged each other. "I've been so worried," said the woman.

"I've been in a bit of bother." Ryan guided the woman to the chair, rotated her, and sat her down. "I've brought someone home."

"Is that blood I smell?" There was a note of alarm in the woman's voice.

"It's not my blood," Ryan reassured her. "Don't be alarmed. Like I said, I've brought a gentleman home with me."

"Oh." The woman started to stand, but Ryan rested a hand on her shoulder and she extended her hand from a sitting position. King walked forward and shook it. Then he saw the woman hadn't the posture and the solely functional dress sense of one who has been born blind, but that she held herself well and took pride in her appearance. She was dressed in matching clothes—light-blue sweater, blue slacks, blue shoes. She had *lost* her sight.

King shook her hand warmly. "Hello." He gave as much as he could with his voice. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Ryan."

"As you see and probably smell, we had a bit of a fire." Ryan extended his hand, inviting King to look around him.

King did as he was invited. The walls were blackened with smoke, as was the ceiling, and at present the Ryans' furniture consisted of a camping table and two folding chairs.

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"It happened two or three days ago," said George Ryan. "Everything went up in smoke. I grabbed Jean and Susie and got them downstairs. They're the most important. I had time to get back and get the guitars."

"You were foolish," said his wife with a smile. "He was foolish, sir."

"Call me Richard," said King.

"He was foolish, Richard. The guitars could have been replaced."

"Not easily," said George Ryan. "They blend so well. And it will be months before the insurance company pays out."

"Anyway, I'm proud of you—you're so courageous."

"I was in no danger," Ryan assured her. "Some tea, Richard?"

King glanced at his watch. "Well, yes—thanks. That would be nice."

Ryan went to the kitchen, peeling his bloodied shirt off.

"Take a seat, Richard." Mrs. Ryan beckoned to the vacant chair.

King sat, the brightly striped Terylene creaking as he lowered himself between the narrow confines of the chair arms.

"It's make do and mend for us until the insurance company pays out. We have no savings. Is my husband badly hurt? He wouldn't tell me even if he is, and of course I can't tell easily."

"No." King allowed a strongly reassuring note into his voice. "No, he isn't. He got jumped, he fought back, and it's the other person's blood you smelled just now. Mr. Ryan's been to the hospital. His nose is broken and it will be sore for a week, but he needs no treatment and they don't want to see him again."

"Thank you. I feel better."

"I'm afraid they got his wallet."

Jean Ryan smiled. "There won't have been much in it."

"Mr. Ryan is a newsagent?"

"Yes. We're not long in the business. We've been married for only about four years."

"Only?" said King. "Four years is a long time. If you've done the first four, you'll do the rest."

In the kitchen, cups rattled and a kettle whistled.

"Well, George is forty-nine, I'm thirty-five. Four years is a long time for people of our years. George gave me the will to live again. My first husband died in a car crash."

"I'm sorry."

"His heart attacked him while he was driving. He died instantly. I was in the car, in the front passenger seat. I lost my sight as a

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result of head injuries. I still have terrible headaches from time to time. My skull often feels like a walnut being splintered open, but I suffer it in silence. George has been so good. He's just all that is the milk of human kindness." She smiled. "We communicate through music. We talk, of course, but as lovers we're not able to gaze into each other's eyes, and so we play the guitar together instead. They're German-made. We ordered them specially. They're our luxury. We touch each other's souls that way. It might sound a bit soft, but it's important to us."

"It doesn't sound soft at all."

"Are you married, Richard?"

"Yes," and he told her about Rosemary and about Iain.

George Ryan entered the room with a tray of tea and biscuits and settled on the floor, refusing to accept King's offer of the chair.

Later, he walked King back to where King had parked the police vehicle. "Jean put me right," he said suddenly, without prompting.

"Sorry?" King carried Ryan's bloodied shirt in a plastic bag.

"I was a bit wild. Not in the sense that young people are wild. Oh, I was that all right when I was young. But I was getting on middle-aged, still drinking too much—no direction in life, no achievements, still in rented rooms. I think if I had carried on, I may well have come to the unwelcome attention of you gentlemen, drunk and disorderly—"

"That's something you don't want," King nodded.

It was dark. The evening was cool and still and calm—pleasant after the heat and bustle.

"Yes, I can imagine. But Jean gave me everything, sorted me out. I found that I have a deep-rooted need to care for somebody. That's why I was going astray. I don't just mean companionship, I mean a need to care for somebody and not in a patronizing way. Jean is as independent as she can be, and getting more so with each day that passes. But she has given meaning to my existence. Before I met her, I was a barfly. Now I'm a man."

"I'm pleased for you."

"We met in a supermarket."

"Oh."

"She was trying to identify items of food by touch. I went up to her, helped her, invited her for coffee, and we took it from there. We got married, and when the insurance money from the accident came through we bought the shop and started the newsagents."

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The two men reached the police vehicle. "We'll be back in touch if we need to speak to you, Mr. Ryan," said King. "Can't promise to get your wallet back, though. I suspect you'll have to write that off."

King shrugged. "It was all but empty. I'll cancel the credit card tomorrow. Safe home, Richard."

The wallet was found the following afternoon by a woman digging her garden. She picked it up and opened it. It was empty, but the name and address of the owner were evident. She laid it to one side and continued to dig the garden. Later she returned to her house, washed, changed, and settled down to dinner. In the evening, in her own good time, she took the wallet to the police station. She was issued a receipt and she walked primly out the police station, her civic duty having been fulfilled. The wallet itself was placed in a self-sealing cellophane sachet and left for the attention of Elliot Bothwell, Forensic Chemist.

It was 14:40 hours on Thursday before Bothwell was able to address his attention to the wallet.

He laid it flat on his working surface and sprinkled it with iron filings, then gently brushed the filings away with a squirrel hairbrush. Latents appeared as would be expected on the inside and outside surfaces of the wallet.

He placed adhesive tape over the latents and then peeled the tape back, thus lifting the prints. He mounted the fingerprints on a card indicating the "open" case to which they were relevant and this he placed in an internal mailbag and labeled it for the attention of the Collator.

It was late on Thursday afternoon before the Collator fed computerized imprints of the latents lifted from the wallet into the computer. He pressed a button and heard the machine whir as it "hunted" and then left his desk to hustle a quick coffee and sandwich. He had had a hard day.

In a small flat above a newsagents shop, a couple, very much in love, sat down after the day's work and played guitars together.

Fabian Donoghue drove from his modern bungalow on the outskirts of Edinburgh to his place of work in central Glasgow. The journey took an hour. It was a pleasant, effortless drive for high summer, with no holdups on the M8. He listened to Radio 4 as he

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drove. As always, it was news and commentary between 7:30 and 8:30. At 8:30 A.M., he parked his Rover in the rear of P Division and at 8:31 he was at his desk, filling his first pipe of the day.

Ray Sussock tapped at his door, holding an armful of files—anxious evidently, thought Donoghue, to hand over and get home. It was still a quiet period in the city, as happens, with not a great deal to hand over—just a spate of car thefts and burglaries and a few drunk and disorderlies.

"Calm before the storm, Ray," said Donoghue, neatly dressed in a three-piece suit with a gold hunter's chain looped across his chest. He was in his early forties.

"Indeed, sir." Sussock stood unsteadily and wearily. He was almost fifteen years older than Donoghue and often, to Donoghue's concerned eyes, looked tired. Very tired indeed.

Alone again in his office, Donoghue leaned back in his chair and read over the files on the ongoing cases Sussock had handed over before he signed out and returned home after a slow night shift.

There was a second, deferential tap on his door. Donoghue looked up. A young man, well dressed, stood on the threshold of his office.

"Jones, sir," said the man. "Collator." He held a file under his arm and Donoghue recognized it as a file of much-dated design. It awoke memories of his early days in the force, memories which were at the same time warm and embarrassing, days when he was in uniform and was finding his feet, days when older cops took him to one side and said, "Forget all that, *this* is how it's done"—and days when the sergeant would take him to one side for an unofficial reprimand.

"Jones," said Donoghue. "Of course." He indicated the vacant chair in front of his desk. "I always seem to speak to you over the phone, never face to face. What can I do for you?"

Jones sat—a little nervously, thought Donoghue. Something was troubling the man.

"What was that that someone said about the past casting long shadows, sir?" Jones sat and opened the old file, and from behind his desk Donoghue cast his eye over old-fashioned forms and dated recording sheets.

"What have you dug up, Mr. Jones?"

"A murderer. In a word. Possibly."

"Tell me!"

"Well, it's in connection with the mugging on Tuesday, the one in the town—"

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Donoghue made a gesture of exasperation. "You'll have to remind me."

"Gentleman got jumped by two neds, took his wallet. Richard King is the interested officer."

"Oh, yes. A newsagent from Bearsden."

"That's the one, sir. His wallet was handed in. Empty, of course."

"Of course."

"Four sets of prints, sir. Two I have identified as belonging to two of our better customers, drug addicts with P.C.s for robbery with violence."

"Good, that's one case we can wrap up."

"And maybe another, sir. The third print I lifted I ran through the machine—just procedure, takes hours. I went and had a break—"

"Yes, yes—"

"Well, when I came back there it was, blinking at me on the monitor screen."

"What was blinking at you on the monitor screen?"

"A result."

"A result?"

"The third print is the same—I mean, is identical to the print on the handle of a weapon, or rather the weapon used in the murder of Sadie Hall."

"Who was Sadie Hall?"

Jones patted the dusty file and handed it to Donoghue. Donoghue took the file and tested its weight. "I'm short of time, Mr. Jones." He handed the file back to Jones.

"To summarize, sir, it seems that Sadie Hall was a universally unpopular female—a 'shrew' is the word, I believe. Got under people's skins. A difficult, impossible woman—she upset a lot of people."

"I get the general idea. Not a nice lady."

"So witness depositions state. Me, I was just ten years old at the time. It appears that her death didn't cause great mourning and irreconcilable grief among Her Majesty's lieges."

"But it was murder?"

"Murder most foul, sir. Repeated stabbing. And there was vomit on the body. The pathologist's report is in here somewhere. Oh, yes. The vomit was not that of the deceased's, was the remnants of a fish supper and beer. That fact helped him pin down the time of death. Both the fish supper and the alcohol would have been consumed before 23:00 hours and the fish and chips were not digested, they were recognizable to the naked eye."

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"So what he's saying is that it was an impulsive act, undertaken while under the influence of alcohol and possibly after considerable provocation. And that the murderer was literally sickened by his act."

"That's the inference, sir. The murder weapon was found at the locus and contained only one set of prints which were not previously known to us and which were only identified yesterday."

"And that is the print which belongs to Mr. George Ryan, who was mugged on Tuesday night. The past casts long shadows indeed."

"Yes, it's Mr. Ryan's print."

"When did this murder take place?"

"Twenty years ago, sir."

"Mr. Ryan would have been—"

"Twenty-nine, sir," said Jones. "He'd have been twenty-nine years old. Sadie Hall was thirty-three."

"Not just difficult, but set-in-her-ways difficult."

"Appears so, sir."

"It makes me feel sick, sir." King closed the file.

"I'm not entirely happy about it, either, Richard." Donoghue pulled on his pipe. "It's why I've stayed on to talk to you about it."

The clock on the wall ticked. It was 17:30 hours. The day was still hot, the sky was still blue, the sun was still a golden ball about to fall into Loch Lomond.

"The two neds who rolled George Ryan were bounced into the cells this afternoon. They coughed and they've been charged."

"That's the loose end tidied up, I suppose," said King, "but the wider issue is still to be sorted out. Twenty years. I don't suppose that—"

"No." Donoghue flicked his lighter. "Don't even think it, Richard. You see, there isn't a wider issue. There's no issue to be sorted out, no issue at all. Don't compromise your career by even thinking that there's an issue. George Ryan has to be arrested and charged with the murder of Sadie Hall."

"I don't want to be the arresting officer, sir."

"I know you don't. That's why I'm ordering you to see it through."

"Have you any idea what he's done for that woman? His wife? He's given life as much as he's taken it. It'll destroy her."

"We don't have the luxury of discretion, Richard. You know that as well as I do. It's the benefit of having a separate prosecution service. It prevents the police from being personally vindictive and

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it removes the angst of discretion. The police south of the border have these problems. We don't."

"It's going to be one of the hardest things I've done, sir."

"Again, that's why I want you to do it. You're going to go far as a police officer, Richard. Part of going far is doing things that you don't like doing. In fact, if you don't do this, you won't be going any farther."

King shot a glance at Donoghue. Donoghue held his stare and raised his eyebrows.

"He might walk, Richard," Donoghue said at length.

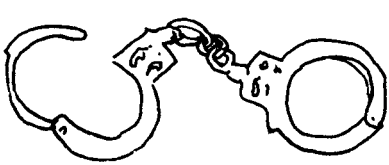
"Do you think it's likely?"

"Odds on, I'd say." Donoghue took his pipe from his mouth and teased the tobacco in the bowl with a ballpoint pen before lighting it again. "If he cops a plea of culpable homicide, if his lawyer can dig up enough people who remember Sadie Hall and he can put them in the witness box, each to do a character assassination, building up a picture of extreme provocation at the time of the incident, and if he can pull enough people to speak well of Mr. Ryan and his good character—" Donoghue waved his hand. "Well, your guess is as good as mine."

"Five years," suggested King. "Out in three?"

"At the very most. He could even walk with a meaningless probation order slapped on him. People have been given probation for murder before now. It might even be that the Procurator Fiscal will 'no pro' it. Corroborative evidence is a bit dodgy. Fingerprints on the murder weapon don't add up to guilt, not in themselves, and if the policy to proceed only if a useful purpose is to be gained by prosecution is adhered to, then—"

Again Donoghue waved his hand. "But that's his decision. Either way, Mr. Ryan has a few questions to answer and what I'm asking you to do is to go and kick a hole in the lives of two people who love each other deeply and bring one of them back to the police station and lock him up. And you have to do it because you're a cop."



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EQMM 50TH ANNIVERSARY CONTEST

Finally—what many of you have been saving up your answers for since the January issue: the last five questions of fifty proposed to you to help celebrate our fifty years of publication, questions we hope have challenged and amused and edified you. After you've answered these five and the forty-five that preceded them to the best of your ability, review the rules and other information on the facing page carefully and send your answers in before the October 15th deadline. No entries will be returned. The winners along with the answers to the questions will be announced in the March 1992 double issue.

46. Who was nominated for an Academy Award this year for his screen adaptation of Jim Thompson's *The Grifters* and went on to win an Edgar Award for best motion picture?

47. Name the author of the novel, *A Shock to the System*, from which we published an excerpt in 1986.

48. Name the writer, also a contributor to EQMM, who adapted *A Shock to the System* for the movie version starring Michael Caine.

49. Name the longtime EQMM contributor who had two stories adapted for the popular television series *McMillan and Wife.*

50. Which EQMM cover model starred in the films *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers?*

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First Prize: Limited-edition poster of *EQMM*'s first cover
Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen, edited by Eleanor Sullivan, published by Carroll & Graf
Ellery Queen 50th Anniversary mug
The option to appear on a cover of *EQMM* with a celebrity of the winner's choice who agrees to said cover

Second and Third Prizes: Limited-edition poster of *EQMM*'s first cover

Fourth through Thirteenth Prizes: *Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen*

Fourteenth through Twenty-third Prizes: Ellery Queen 50th Anniversary mugs

The winner will be the top scorer in answering 50 questions related to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*—there will be 5 questions an issue from January through October 1991. In case of a tie, the earliest postmark will determine the winner. The deadline is October 15, 1991—entries should carry a postmark no later than that date.

All 50 questions must be submitted as a unit, the pages or copies of the pages for all ten issues together. Material sent in sections will not be considered. Only one entry will be allowed per person. All entries must include the contestant's legal name and full address. No entries will be returned, even if accompanied by a return envelope. Winners will be notified by mail and announced in the March 1992 issue. (No phone calls, please.)

Contributors to *EQMM* are not eligible to win the contest, nor are employees and their immediate families of Davis Publications, Inc., Carlson Promotion Group, or any of their affiliated agents, advertising, and promotional production agencies. All applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations apply.

By entering the contest, all prize winners agree that Davis Publications and any of their respective agencies, affiliates, and employees shall have no liability for any injury, loss, or damage of any kind resulting from acceptance, possession, or use of any prize. Prizes are not transferable and are unreturnable. Davis Publications reserves the right to substitute a prize for one of equal or greater value and is not responsible for lost, late, damaged, or misdirected entries.

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a special Inspector Dover reprint by

JOYCE PORTER

Joyce Porter, born in Marple, Cheshire, on March 28, 1924, died on December 9th of last year. She had served with the Women's Royal Air Force as a flight officer between 1949 and 1963. The first of her novels, Dover One, *appeared in 1964.*

In a piece about her in The Independent *shortly after her death, Robert Barnard wrote: "Inspector Wilf Dover may not have been created to cock a snook at the aristocratic aloofness of Ngaio Marsh's Alleyn or the civilized sensibilities of P. D. James's Dalgliesh, but he certainly provides his own commentary on such figures. MacGregor, his sidekick, elegant and courteous, long-suffering but not much brighter than his boss, is a splendid foil . . . "*

SWEATING IT OUT WITH DOVER

by JOYCE PORTER

Every English summer, no matter how awful the weather is in general, is blessed with one gloriously hot, really sweltering day—and in drought years we sometimes have two. The savage murder of young Elvin Garlick took place on one of these exceptional days when the sky was blue and the sun blazed down. So, too, did Detective Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover's "investigation." Indeed, his conduct of the case and the highly unseasonable weather were not unconnected.

It was getting on for midday when Detective Chief Inspector Dover, chaperoned as always by MacGregor, his young and handsome sergeant, arrived at Skinners Farm. The temperature was already pushing up into the eighties and most people would have been delighted at getting out into the country on such a marvelous day.

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Chief Inspector Dover, however, wasn't most people and, in spite of appearances, Skinners Farm was only twenty-five miles from Charing Cross and so not really country anyhow.

Charitable people might have thought it was the heat which had addled Dover's brains, but in reality he was just as slow-witted on the most temperate day. On this occasion, he didn't seem able to get it into his head that Skinners Farm wasn't actually a farm but an over-restored Georgian house standing in its own grounds and separated from the hurly-burly of the outside world by a couple of fields full of gently ruminating black-and-white cows.

"I suppose they call it a farm, sir," said MacGregor, surreptitiously dabbing at the back of his neck with a lightly starched white handkerchief, "because it was once the farmhouse."

"Bloody fools," said Dover, the sweat standing out in beads on his forehead. As a concession to the weather, he had left off his overcoat—but the greasy bowler hat, the blue-serge suit, and the down-at-heel boots were the same as ever. " 'Strewth," he panted, "but it's hot!"

"Perhaps we could have the window down a bit, sir," said MacGregor, who'd been wondering for some time if the peculiar smell in the police car was Dover or merely something agricultural they were spraying on the fields.

"I hope they've shifted that blooming body," said Dover querulously as he plucked at his shirt. "It'll be ponging to high heaven else."

MacGregor glanced at his watch. "They may not have moved it yet, sir," he warned. "It's only about an hour and a half since they found him, and since I understand he's lying in some sort of copse and reasonably sheltered from the sun—"

"You won't get me going to see it," declared Dover flatly. "I'll bet it's all crawling with flies. Here"—he roused himself as the car turned into a driveway—"are we there?"

The married couple who lived at Skinners Farm were, understandably, in a state of some distress and they greeted the arrival of the two high-powered detectives from Scotland Yard as though it was a heaven-sent solution to all the horrors of that terrible morning. Anxiously hospitable, they conducted a profusely sweating Dover through the house and out onto a comparatively cool and shady veranda.

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Here they installed him on a cane chaise longue, plied him with cigarettes, and asked him what he would like in the way of a long cool drink. Dover, having graciously accepted pretty little Mrs. Hewson's suggestion of an iced lager, hoisted his boots up onto the footrest and flopped back. 'Strewth, this was the life! And it was going to take more than a bloody murder case to dislodge him from it.

When, a few minutes later, Mr. Hewson came out with the drinks, Dover was more or less obliged to open his eyes. Having half a pint of ice-cold liquid sloshing around in his stomach had quite a bracing effect on him, however, and for a few minutes he was actually sitting up and taking some interest in his surroundings. The veranda, he discovered, overlooked a large and well kept garden which fell gently away from the house. In the distance was what appeared to be a clump of trees where several figures in dark blue could dimly be seen moving about.

Dover had no wish to strain his eyesight by peering through the heat haze, so he treated himself to a good look at his host instead. Mr. Hewson, he ascertained without much interest, was a man of about fifty, but very fit and youthful-looking. He was wearing a pair of powder-blue shorts and matching T-shirt, but his manner was far from being carefree and relaxed. As he explained with an uneasy laugh, he wasn't accustomed to stumbling over dead bodies in the middle of a Saturday morning.

Dover relieved his own inner tensions with a good belch and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "*You* found him, did you?"

"No, not exactly," said Mr. Hewson. "Tansy, here"—he indicated his wife, who was happily engaged in refilling Dover's glass—"actually found him, but naturally I went down to have a look before I phoned the police. I hoped," concluded Mr. Hewson with a bleak little smile, "that she'd got it wrong."

"Still hanging around, are they?" asked Dover through a yawn which gave everybody a fine view of his dentures.

"The local police? Yes. The Inspector's using the phone in the sitting room and the rest of them are still down there in the old orchard." Mr. Hewson pointed toward the clump of trees which Dover had already more or less noticed. "They're searching through the undergrowth. Do you want me to tell them you're here?"

The last thing Dover wanted was a mob of local flatfoots swarming all over him in that heat. He leered encouragingly at pretty little Mrs. Hewson. "So what happened, missus?" he asked and rattled his now-empty glass.

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Pretty little Mrs. Hewson grew tearful. She'd told her story four times already and really didn't want to go through it all again.

Dover had little sympathy for a woman who seemed incapable of recognizing an empty glass when she saw one. "Oh, get on with it!" he advised impatiently.

Mrs. Hewson gulped, dried her eyes on a wisp of a handkerchief, clutched her husband's hand, and complied. "It's all my fault, actually. If I hadn't decided to grub up the old orchard and turn it into a vegetable garden, none of this would have happened. Freddie wasn't a bit keen on the idea—were you, darling? He said he'd do it himself sometime but—well, I know how busy he is, so I got hold of this young man from the village to come and do it."

"What young man?" demanded Dover, sportingly moving his empty glass even nearer so as to give Mrs. Hewson every chance.

"The young man who's been murdered. Elvin Garlick. He works for a firm of landscape gardeners, so, of course, he's able to borrow their equipment."

"You mean he was doing the job for you in his own time?" MacGregor, sipping straight lemonade because he didn't drink when he was on duty, was taking notes. Well, somebody in that partnership had to behave responsibly, didn't they?

"Oh, yes!" said Mrs. Hewson with some pride. "And for cash. That way you get it cheaper because nobody has to pay income tax or V.A.T. or anything. The only trouble was," she added with a disconsolate little moue, "he could only come on weekends and that meant I couldn't keep it a secret from Freddie. I'd wanted to present him with a fait accompli, you see."

"Ugh," grunted Dover, just to show he was still awake.

"Well, Elvin arrived about half past eight this morning." Mrs. Hewson raised her pretty little chin defensively. "He told me to call him Elvin. He said everybody always did, especially when he was obliging them. Well, I told him exactly what I wanted doing and left him to get on with it."

"And where were you all this time, sir?" MacGregor turned to Mr. Hewson.

"I was still getting up. Saturday's my day off, too, you know." Freddie Hewson felt that further explanation was required. "I'm a stockbroker, so of course I'm in the City all week."

"So you didn't see Mr. Garlick?"

"No. I knew somebody'd come to the house, of course, and then later you could hear his rotovator or whatever churning away down

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there in the orchard. That's when this naughty little girl here"—Mr. Hewson squeezed his wife's hand affectionately—"finally had to tell me what she was up to."

"He was ever so surprised!" simpered little Mrs. Hewson happily.

"And then what, sir?"

"Well, then nothing, Sergeant." Mr. Hewson said, "Tansy and I had breakfast out here on the veranda. Garlick was all right then, because we could hear him—couldn't we, darling? After breakfast I went round to the back of the house to work on my car. I'm rebuilding a 1934 Alvis and there were a few things I wanted to get done before it got too hot."

"And you, Mrs. Hewson?"

"I was in the kitchen, getting as much as I could ready for dinner tonight. Well, you don't want to spend a glorious day like this slaving over a hot stove, do you?"

"The kitchen's on the far side of the house, too, Sergeant," explained Mr. Hewson, "so neither of us could see anything going on in the old orchard. And, as I told the other policemen, we didn't hear anything, either. We were both pretty absorbed in what we were doing and, of course, Garlick was a good way off and he wasn't using his machinery the whole time. Well, at about eleven, I suppose it would be, Tansy brought me out a cup of coffee to the garage. She said she was going to take some down to Garlick, too. I would have gone myself, of course, but I'd just started stripping down the clutch and it was all a big fraught and I didn't want to leave it."

"Oh, I didn't mind, lovie!" cooed Mrs. Hewson. "Like I said, I was glad to get out of that kitchen for a few minutes and stretch my legs."

MacGregor nodded. "So you walked down to the old orchard with the coffee, Mrs. Hewson?"

"That's right. Well, when I got there, I couldn't see or hear Elvin anywhere, so I shouted his name. I wasn't keen to go tramping about down there because it's waist-high in weeds and nettles and things." Mrs. Hewson stretched out her shapely bare legs for the general delectation and to emphasize the point she was making.

MacGregor did, indeed, begin to sweat a bit more freely, but it was many moons since any part of the female anatomy had sent the blood racing through Dover's veins. He merely pushed his bowler hat a bit farther back on his head and inquired if anybody'd got a cigarette to spare.

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The murder investigation ground to a halt as the Hewsons obligingly rushed off in all directions to fetch cigarettes, matches, and ashtrays. They finally redeemed themselves by refilling Dover's glass, and it was only when they'd got Dover happily swilling and sucking away that Mrs. Hewson was able to finish her story.

The end proved something of an anticlimax. Having received no answer to her shouts, Mrs. Hewson had gingerly ventured farther into the old orchard and found Garlick just lying there, face down, with his own pitchfork sticking out of his back. Pretty little Mrs. Hewson wasn't sure whether she'd screamed, but she was certain she hadn't touched the body.

"I didn't have to," she explained unhappily. "I just knew he was dead. I dropped everything and came running back up here to tell Freddie."

Mr. Hewson took up the tale. "I went tearing down to the old orchard," he said, "and there he was. I couldn't see any sign of breathing—Garlick was stripped to the waist, by the way—and with that pitchfork pinning him to the ground, well, I knew it couldn't be an accident or anything. I left everything just as it was and came back up here and phoned the police."

"We had a patrol car here in less than five minutes." A man who had been waiting just inside the sitting room for a suitably dramatic moment stepped forward. There was an unmistakable drop of the jaw when he got his first clear look at Dover, but he recovered well and introduced himself. "Detective Inspector Threlfall, sir. I arrived at eleven twenty-six in response to an urgent summons from the patrol car and I have been in charge of the preliminary investigation since my arrival."

Detective Inspector Threlfall paused in case the seventeen and a quarter stone of solid flesh stretched out on the chaise longue wished to make some response. It didn't. With the mercury climbing that high in the thermometers, Dover had no energy to spare for social niceties.

Inspector Threlfall cleared his throat and tried again. "You'll want to see the body, sir."

That stung Dover into life. "I bloody shan't!" he growled, the mere thought of venturing out into the hot bright world outside making him feel quite sick.

"The doctor thought that Garlick had been knocked unconscious with a blow across the back of the head, sir." Inspector Threlfall would never have believed that Dover didn't care a fig either way.

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"Then he was run through with the pitchfork while he was still out. Crude, but effective."

MacGregor took pity on the Inspector. "Are there any signs as to which way the murderer came, sir?"

Inspector Threlfall shook his head. "Not so far, Sergeant. Mind you, Buff had been churning things up for a couple of hours before he bought it, so it's a tricky job trying to sort things out. The murderer could have come from almost any direction. Crept down this way past the house or come across the fields or"—Inspector Threlfall waved his arms about in the appropriate directions—"got into the orchard from the other side. You can't see it from here, but there's a road running along there not fifty yards from where Buff was killed."

Dover's chair creaked pathetically as he tried to find a more comfortable position.

"Buff?" queried MacGregor with a frown.

Inspector Threlfall shrugged. "That was his nickname. I've known him since he was old enough to appear before a juvenile court, you know, and he's been a regular customer ever since. We're going to miss him. He's had a go at pretty well everything—pinching old ladies' pension books, drunk and disorderly, breaking and entering, nicking cars, shoplifting—"

"Good heavens!" gasped Mrs. Hewson faintly.

Inspector Threlfall glanced at her with just a touch of contempt. "That's how he got his job with Wythenshaw's, madam. His probation officer swung it for him. Well, they'd tried everything else. Seems they thought a spell of honest toil might sort him out. I don't know what old Wythenshaw's going to say when he finds out Buff's been 'borrowing' all that expensive gear."

"But he told me his boss was only too willing to lend him the stuff," protested Mrs. Hewson, carefully avoiding her husband's eye.

"Well, he would, wouldn't he, madam?" asked Inspector Threlfall easily. "Always had a very smooth tongue, young Buff, especially where the ladies were concerned." He turned back to MacGregor. "That's where I'd start looking, if I was you, Sergeant. Buff's got more girls into trouble than you and I've had hot dinners. There must be hundreds of fathers and husbands and boy friends thirsting for his blood—and that's not counting any members of the fair sex who might have had it in for him."

"It hardly sounds like a woman's crime," said MacGregor doubtfully. He was dying to get down to the old orchard and see things for himself.

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"I don't see why not. You don't need much strength to knock somebody out with a chunk of wood or something, and that pitchfork had prongs as sharp as a razor. It would go through him like a hot knife through butter."

"Oh, dear!" moaned Mrs. Hewson, clamping both hands across her mouth and going as white as a sheet.

Her husband leaped across and, wrapping his arms protectively round her, helped her to her feet. He smiled apologetically at the three stolidly staring policemen. "She's a bit upset, I'm afraid. I'll get her to have a little lie-down. You don't want us any more just now, do you? I think we've told you all we know."

Nobody seemed much concerned one way or the other, though Dover did bestir himself to remark that, if Mr. Hewson was thinking of making his wife some tea, he—Dover—wouldn't say no to a cup.

"These cold drinks are all right," said Dover confidingly to an astonished Inspector Threlfall, "but there's nothing to touch a good hot cup of tea, especially in this bloody weather. It brings you out in a good muck sweat."

"Oh—quite," said Inspector Threlfall. "Er—I was wondering what your plans were, sir."

"Plans?" Dover squinted suspiciously.

"I thought you might like to pop down to the village, sir, and have a word with the lad's mother. He lived with her and she might just know something. I've got some chaps out making general inquiries around the neighborhood, but I thought I'd best leave Mrs. Garlick for you."

There was an awkward pause. Not that Dover was hesitating. Wild horses weren't going to shift him off that veranda until the temperature outside dropped by at least twenty degrees, but there was the problem of conveying this message to Inspector What's-his-name without too much loss of face. "How many people knew he was going to be working here this morning?" asked Dover in an attempt to give himself time to think.

Inspector Threlfall rubbed his chin. "Not many, I should think. Not if he was borrowing the gear without permission. Besides, it's not the sort of thing you'd expect young Buff to be doing in his spare time. Normally, if he wanted extra money, he'd just nick it."

MacGregor wiped the perspiration off his upper lip. The veranda was only comparatively cool. "Maybe he'd turned over a new leaf?"

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"More likely casing the joint," said Inspector Threlfall. "The Hewsons must have been mad to let him come within a mile of this place."

MacGregor fanned himself gently with his notebook. "It was more Mrs. Hewson, wasn't it? I don't think her husband knew anything about it until Garlick turned up this morning."

"Seems he wanted that old orchard left just as it was," said Inspector Threlfall. "Claims it's a nature reserve or something. I reckon he'll pin her ears back for her when all this is over."

Most untypically at this stage in the proceedings, Dover was wide-awake and listening intently. It wasn't, however, the lethargic conversation about the Hewsons' private life that was claiming his anxious attention, but the more interesting rumbles that were coming from his stomach.

MacGregor laughed a cool, sophisticated, man-of-the-world laugh. "Hewson'll just have to teach her who's boss, otherwise he won't be able to call his soul his own."

"Hark who's talking!" jeered Dover, for whom it was never too hot and sticky to be unpleasant. He left his guts to take care of themselves for a moment. "You could write all you know about married life on a threepenny bit, laddie, and still have room for the Lord's Prayer. Any moron can see that she's got him by the short and curly. What do you expect when a man goes and marries a flighty young thing half his age?"

"I don't think he's quite as—"

"Near as damn-it!" snarled Dover, who didn't care to be contradicted, especially when he wasn't feeling too frisky in the first place. "There's no fool like an old fool."

"Speaking of marriage," said Inspector Threlfall—but nobody was listening to him.

Dover had tuned into those ominous visceral splutterings again and MacGregor was frantically trying to work out if Dover had spotted something he'd missed. "Do you think it might be a case of jealousy, sir?" he asked, eyeing Dover doubtfully.

Dover blinked. "Eh?"

MacGregor grew even more worried. "The elderly husband, sir, and the attractive young wife? Plus the sexy young man from the village? Do you think there could have been anything between Mrs. Hewson and Garlick?" MacGregor appealed to Inspector Threlfall. "You did say Garlick was attractive to women, didn't you, sir?"

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"Like a honeypot to flies," agreed Inspector Threlfall.

"Or, maybe"—MacGregor was more interested in his own brilliant deductions—"it was *Mrs. Hewson!* She takes the coffee down to the old orchard, say, and Garlick makes improper advances towards her. She repulses him. He persists. She picks up the nearest fallen branch or what-have-you and—"

"Bunkum!" said Dover, coming out in a hot flush at the mere thought of such an expenditure of energy in that heat. "She'd not have the strength. She's only knee-high to a grasshopper."

"Garlick wasn't all that big a chap, sir," said Inspector Threlfall as he remembered that these two Scotland Yard experts hadn't yet even seen the body. "A woman might have done it. But what I wanted to mention, sir, was about the Hewsons."

"Well, why don't you spit it out, then? I haven't got all bloody day to sit around waiting for you to come to the point."

The training that Inspector Threlfall had received at the police school all those years ago stood him in good stead now. Otherwise Skinners Farm might have witnessed another and even bloodier murder. "They're not actually husband and wife, sir. Not legally, that is."

Dover shrugged his ample shoulders and folded his hands over his ample paunch. "So what? It's no skin off my nose." He closed his eyes against the glare coming in from the garden, only to snap them open again as the desire to score off a brother police officer proved stronger than the longing for a quiet forty winks. "She wears a wedding ring," he pointed out, much to MacGregor's amazement, because one didn't really expect Dover to notice such things. "And she calls herself 'Mrs.' "

"That's as maybe, sir," said Inspector Threlfall, nobly swallowing the rejoinder he would have liked to have made. "But they are definitely not married—well, not to each other. Hewson's already got a wife. Or as far as anybody *knows*, he has."

"And what the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just that I happened to be involved when she did a bunk, sir. The first Mrs. Hewson, that is. I was on duty when Hewson came in to report that she was missing. It must be six years ago now. He wanted us to find her."

"But you didn't?"

"There's nothing we can do about a runaway wife, sir. You know that. I carried out a routine investigation, but there was nothing suspicious about her disappearance. All I could do was suggest to

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Mr. Hewson that he try the Salvation Army. Not that it was her sort of thing, really."

Working on the principle that "talk, talk on the veranda" was a damned sight better than "walk, walk across that dirty great garden," Dover demanded more details about the first Mrs. Hewson and her mysterious disappearance. Inspector Threlfall was obliged to search his memory. As far as he was concerned, the whole incident had been totally unremarkable. It was true that the first Mrs. Hewson had cleared out without a word and nobody had heard from her since, but this could be attributed to pure spite.

"Spite?" queried Dover, almost as though he was interested.

"It makes it difficult for Hewson to divorce her, sir. As things stand now, he's got to wait all of seven years and then apply to the courts for permission to presume that she's dead. Meantime, his hands are tied. You can't serve divorce papers on a woman you can't find. Hewson himself reckoned she'd stay out of sight until the seven years was nearly up and then put in an appearance again, just to be bloody-minded. The marriage was pretty well on the rocks when she left home, but she seems to have made up her mind not to let him go without a struggle."

"You're sure there were no signs of foul play?"

"Quite sure, sir. She'd taken all her clothes and jewelry and her passport. There were a couple of suitcases missing and she'd cleared out their joint banking account. Her car turned up a few weeks later. It had been abandoned in the long-stay car park at Gatwick Airport, but there were no clues in it as to where she'd gone."

Dover ran a stubby finger round inside his shirt collar. 'Strewth, it was hot! He hoped What's-his-name wasn't going to be all bloody day with that cup of tea. "Was there another man?"

"Hewson thought there might be, sir, but he didn't know. She was on her own here quite a bit while he was off working in the City."

"What about her friends?" Dover might not have been the world's most brilliant detective, but in his long years in the police even he'd managed to pick up a few bits of technique. "Did she mention to any of them she was thinking of running away?"

Inspector Threlfall shook his head. "As far as I can remember, sir, she didn't have any friends. At least, not round here."

"Relations?" Dover had begun thrashing about in his chair like a stranded porpoise.

Inspector Threlfall watched these antics nervously. Was Fatty having some kind of heat stroke or was he merely trying to hoist

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himself to his feet. "Only a sister in Ireland, sir, and they hadn't spoken for years."

With a final wheeze, Dover managed to stand up. Too hot to move, it may have been, but when Nature calls even the least fastidious of us is obliged to go. Especially if we have bladders as weak as Dover's. "Bloody foreign muck!" he grumbled. "It goes straight through you. I don't know why people can't give you proper English beer." He turned to MacGregor, who was trying to pretend that none of this had anything to do with him. "Where is it, laddie?"

Long association with Dover had taught MacGregor to give a high priority on every possible occasion to locating where "it" was. "I believe there's a small cloakroom at the foot of the stairs, sir."

Dover departed at an urgent trot, leaving a thoughtful silence behind him on the veranda.

Inspector Threlfall loosened his tie. "He's a bit of a lad, eh?" he said at last.

MacGregor responded with a thin humorless smile and changed the subject. "Have you any ideas about who killed Garlick, sir?"

"Some," said Inspector Threlfall, seeing no particular reason to be helpful. Left alone, he reckoned he could have solved this case in a couple of hours flat.

"One of his fellow yobboes, sir?"

"Could be."

"Friday is usually payday," observed MacGregor carefully. "Garlick was a bit of a drinker, I think you said?"

"He liked his pint."

MacGregor closed his notebook to show that this was an off-the-record conversation. "You often get drunken rows blowing up on a Friday night. Maybe this one didn't get settled until Saturday morning. I mean, who else—except his mates—would have known he'd be working out here this morning? Apart from Mrs. Hewson, that is. He'd have hardly spread the news around, would he? And it would only be a local chap who'd know there was easy access to that old orchard from the road."

Inspector Threlfall contented himself with raising his eyebrows in an enigmatic sort of way. If that was how the clever dicks from the Yard saw it, good luck to 'em! Inspector Threlfall wasn't going to stick his neck out just to show them where they'd gone wrong.

It seemed a very long time before Dover came waddling back. MacGregor tried to get him to continue on down to the scene of the

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crime while he was still on his feet, but Dover brushed his sergeant's efforts to one side and flopped back into his chair.

"I've just been out round the back," he announced.

MacGregor's heart sank. Oh, it was all so mortifying! "But, sir," he wailed, "I told you exactly where the cloakroom was!"

Dover flapped an impatient hand. "Not that, you fool!" he growled. "I went there first. It was after, when I went round the back of the house to have a look. Bloody good thing I did, too. Do you know what? You can't see the kitchen from the garage and you can't see the garage from the kitchen."

"Sir?"

"That means he did it, laddie!" explained Dover helpfully. He nodded cheerfully at Inspector Threlfall. "All we need now is a bulldozer and a warrant."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Dover's good humor began to evaporate. If there was one thing that really got to him, it was stupidity, especially on a blooming hot day like this. "You got cloth ears or something?" he asked Inspector Threlfall savagely. "I've solved your murder for you. 'Strewth, some people want it with bloody jam on!"

Inspector Threlfall very sensibly clung onto the one bit of this he could understand. "You've solved the case, sir?"

"It came to me out there," said Dover, not without a touch of pride. "I wasn't just twiddling my thumbs, you know. Then I went round the back and Bob's your uncle. It all fits. All you've got to do is dig up the evidence and charge him with murder."

"But charge—er—who, sir?"

"Well, What's-his-name, you bloody fool!" roared Dover. "Who else, for God's sake? Look, this morning he waits until his wife—or whatever she is—is safely shut up in the kitchen, right? Then he nips out of the garage, round the *other* side of the house—get it?—and down across the bloody garden."

The gesticulations which accompanied this vivid account were a little uncertain, as Dover had not actually seen the terrain he was describing. "He sneaks into this orchard place, finds young Who's-your-father, picks up the nearest blunt instrument, and knocks him out. Okay? After that, all he has to do is finish the job off with the pitchfork. Easy as shelling peas."

Rightly deducing that nothing useful was going to emerge from Inspector Threlfall's feebly gaping mouth, MacGregor himself tried to introduce a note of sanity into the proceedings.

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"Are you saying that Mr. Hewson murdered Garlick, sir? But why should he? He didn't even know Garlick. In fact"—MacGregor riffled officiously through his notebook—"he claims that he'd never even seen Garlick until after he was dead. That's a very definite statement, sir, and easy enough to check."

Dover scowled. Trust MacGregor to start nit-picking! "He didn't have to know Garlick," he said sullenly, "he'd have croaked anybody."

"You mean Mr. Hewson is some sort of homicidal maniac, sir?"

Dover's scowl blackened. If it hadn't been for the excessively hot weather and MacGregor being such a big strapping chap, Dover might have been sorely tempted to go across and belt him one. Insolent young pup! "*Hewson,*" he snarled through gritted dentures, "would have killed *anybody* who started digging that old orchard up."

The penny dropped and MacGregor could have kicked himself. "You mean—"

"I mean that's where he buried his first blooming wife!" snapped Dover, making sure that MacGregor didn't steal his thunder this time. "She didn't run away. He killed her and then buried her with all her clothes and jewelry and stuff out there in that orchard."

Inspector Threlfall recovered his powers of speech. "But I investigated the first Mrs. Hewson's disappearance, sir, and there were no suspicious circumstances."

"'Strewth," sneered Dover happily, "you wouldn't know a suspicious circumstance if it jumped up and bit you! Hewson was just too clever for you, that's all."

"Well, it's true the marriage wasn't a very happy one," said Inspector Threlfall, meekly accepting the slur on his professional competence, "but we took that as a motive for her leaving him." He glanced across at MacGregor for support. "I suppose we could have Hewson in again and ask him a few questions."

Dover reacted to this suggestion with unusual passion. "Not yet, you bloody don't!" he spluttered indignantly. "I'm still waiting for that cup of tea he promised me!" This must have sounded a bit thin even to Dover's ears. "Besides," he added in an attempt to place his policy of inaction beyond all question, "I've been invited to lunch.

"Look, why don't you two just push off and get that orchard dug up? It'll probably take you two or three hours. Soon as you find the wife's dead body, you can come and tell me. But not before two o'clock at the earliest, mind! Then we can confront What's-his-name

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with the facts and get a confession out of him. There's nothing to worry about. He's not the stuff heroes are made of. He'll soon cooperate if we shove him around a bit. And now"—the Dover eyelids drooped slowly over the Dover eyes—"why don't you just bug off and leave me to have a quiet think?"

DETECTIVERSE

FAMILY DYNAMICS

by JEANETTE WEISS

His father towered over him
With disapproving eyes.
His overbearing rectitude
Soon lead to his demise.

His mother hovered over him
With sharp, possessive eyes.
That she was sent to join her spouse
Should come as no surprise.

Disdain was in his *sister's* eyes,
Contempt was in his brother's:
Their fate was written in the stars—
They went to join the others.

And now he'd live in blissful peace,
Unchained from family strife,
But nature's laws hold him in thrall—
He badly wants a wife.

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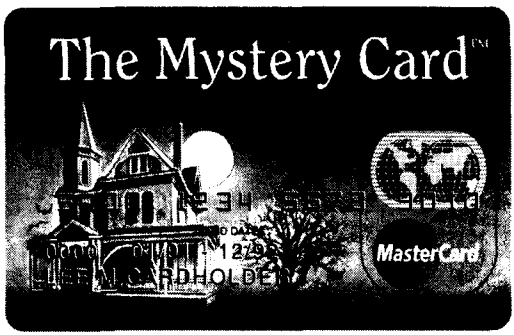

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

West sat down at his desk. A moment later the coffee cart arrived, the attendant's sloppy grin announcing they'd issued another brandy ration because of the trouble outside. West sipped at the three fingers of cheap, hacksaw-edged liquid in the styrofoam cup. When it was gone, he turned back to the doorway and poised his pen as if he was working.

Probably James Powell's darkest and most pungent vision since his "A Dirge for Clowntown," which won the EQMM Readers Award for 1989 . . .

WINTER HIATUS

by JAMES POWELL

The fields flashed by, all stubble, stooks, and golden sunshine. Then the train entered a shady slope of trees. Suddenly the trees fell away and there was the sun again, glinting on the church steeples of the town.

West felt the slowing of the train. Then he heard a familiar, unhurried voice say, "Happy Valley. Next stop is Happy Valley." Still smiling, he turned from the window just as Mr. Vining, the conductor, leaned across to collect his ticket. The man had a dependable face and the visored cap with the Greenfields and Eldorado Line badge sat squarely on his head. "Welcome back, Mr. West. You've been a stranger."

Before West could answer, the train gave a jolt and everything went dark.

When the light returned, it was dim and electric. West found himself back on the other train, the crowded commuter which, a

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second before, had slid to a stop deep inside Grand Central Station.

None of the passengers moved or spoke. For the first few moments, the railway car was ears and heartbeats. The week before, a roving band of street people and dentists—one of those strange alliances of the moment—had jumped the passengers as they surged out onto the platform, hitting them hard and mauling them badly. The passengers might have withstood the street people just by not showing fear. But dentists expect fear. Not finding it brought an extra frenzy to their attack.

So today the passengers listened until they were satisfied nothing was amiss before moving toward the exits. Those who hadn't formed into fours did so now and went back to an old commuter custom of playing bridge on the train. Few had the nerves for the game any more, but a foursome remained the basic defensive unit.

West's foursome let the drift toward the door bring them together. Out on the platform, West took the point. He'd been there the longest. The others called him the Old Man, although he was only thirty-five.

During the bunch-up at the platform gate, West noticed the singleton with the good shoulders and the alligator briefcase watching them again from the edge of the crowd. West's people had christened the man the Hyena. Singletons were always eyeing foursomes, looking for someone showing the strain, someone whose place they might take. West glanced around at his people as they passed through the gate, wondering if the Hyena had seen something he'd missed. Then his mind turned to leading the way as they elbowed through the peripheral doubletons and singletons into the mainstream of foursomes heading for the downtown subway trains.

The passageway was a dark, littered, bloodstained slope as cold and endless as the turbulent streets above their heads. West set his jaw and lengthened his stride, eyes alert for trouble. But, God, his nerves were shot, his body utterly exhausted. And they were only a month into Winter Hiatus, those terrible weeks between the Christmas rush and Easter when the city, without tourists or daytrippers to feed on, feeds on itself.

West tensed. Up ahead where several passageways entered a small rotunda, a large black man with a scarred face and a filthy bandage on one hand was coming down an exit to the street holding a garbage can over his head. Moaning like a hurt child, the man hurled it into the fast-moving column of people. It hit a woman in a business suit sprinting at the edge of the crowd. She collapsed in

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a heap. West let himself be swept on by. There was no way to help her. The city demanded its daily quota of blood. Her blood, a tourist's blood, West's blood, it didn't care.

Suddenly West remembered where he'd seen the guy with the garbage can before. He'd worked just down the hall in the public relations wing of the City Hall Annex when West first started on the taxi desk. What was his name? He hadn't had the scars then.

Morgan. Morgan made himself something of a P.R. legend by concocting this phony jazz form—the Big Apple sound, he called it—and this whole stable of imaginary musicians who played it and the out-of-the-way clubs they worked. He planted items in the jazz magazines and staged photographs showing the Rhythm Rajahs playing at Fat Clive and Lady Kat's or Skoobie Hitchcock packing them in at the Licorice Stick Lounge.

He even came up with Potemkin Records, the label they recorded for. Pretty soon all kinds of out-of-town jazz types were wandering around late at night in parts of the city where they didn't belong, looking for Mr. Whitey's After-Hours Club to hear the Strideman Standish Trio, and a lot of them didn't come back alive. And ditto those who went hunting for Ozzie's Platter Barn ("Hard-to-find Potemkins Our Specialty").

West's own job with Public Relations wasn't anything that flashy. A million tourists go back home with five million horror stories about city cab drivers. West's job was essentially damage control. He fed the media weekly stories of the Stradivarius Left in Taxi Returned by Honest Cabbie in Time for Carnegie Hall Concert variety to help offset all the bad word-of-mouth. Sometimes he tried to kid himself he was restoring people's faith in their fellow man. But not now. Come Winter Hiatus, you just held on tight and tried to survive any way you could. Such as with Happy Valley, this little town he'd dreamed up over the years. If things got too tough, West would close his eyes and imagine himself on a visit there. Happy Valley was his secret strength, a place he'd never hinted about to anyone—not even to Fran, his wife.

The hurrying crowd pounded up a short flight of steps, along another corridor, and down more steps to the subway platform where a train stood with its doors open. The crowd flowed inside.

West found a seat beside a pole. His people stood around him. As the train started up, West saw the Hyena watching from the end of the car. What did the man want? West turned away and closed his eyes . . .

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He was coming down the steps from the railway station, past borders of red geraniums and white impatiens. It was late afternoon on a warm autumn day and the slanting sun made church windows of the bright trees. Before he'd gone a block, Merle and Mert, the Blandish twins, had hailed him by name from their big old car to ask if he wanted a lift. Smiling, he shook his head and patted his stomach, as if to say thanks but I need the exercise.

He strode on down the long broad street, knowing that he could turn in at any gate and be greeted with open arms. "It's Mr. West, Mother—set another place at the table," freckly-handed Cedric Loomis would boom. He had a baritone voice and a job at the Widget factory, where the workers sang songs all day on the production line. And after dinner, West and the Loomises would push their chairs back from the table and talk. When West spoke, they would nod and listen as if his words had weight. And their answers would be well considered, for they knew West to be a serious man on a mission so important they would not allude to it without lowering their voices. Is everything going all right? And West would lie and say everything was fine.

But tonight West turned in at no gate. He continued on his way, enjoying his walk into the deepening twilight. He had decided he would eat in the dining room at Happy Valley Lodge, where the young waitress was in love with him. Afterward he'd go to his room there and finish his paperwork.

Which reminded him: on his last visit back, he'd once again sensed that someone had stayed there during his absence. It was a presence like a perfume in the air. A familiar perfume. And he thought to himself, what if Fran had dreamed up Happy Valley, too? What if—

Something thumped down hard on the subway-car roof. West sprang to his feet, wide-eyed and alert. Not long ago they'd found an entire subway train filled with dead passengers and crew in one of the tunnels. Somehow one of the moleys, the people who inhabited the underground darkness, had dropped down onto a roof and worked his way up to the motorman, stopping the train where his buddies waited along the tracks. Fran had cried watching the story on the evening news.

West and his people locked arms and stood in a tight square, each facing outward, ready to kick hard with both feet if the threat came in his direction. There was gunfire on the roof and West got a glimpse of a body plunging by the window. The crew had had some-

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body up there laying for the bastard. Farther along the tunnel, he thought he made out a sullen line of faces beside the tracks.

A few minutes later, West's foursome was clattering up the stairs from the subway into a street thick with smoke and gridlocked traffic. In the distance, horns were honking. But here at the intersection, the drivers were out of their vehicles and at each other, using fists, tire irons, bottles, anything, in an almost joyful, clenched-teeth frenzy, like a berserker's rush to death. West avoided the fighting and led his people over the bumpers and through the intersection. Then they teamed up with others going their way in a kind of flying wedge of foursomes. Behind them they heard rifle fire. A sniper working from a rooftop. They hurried on. He was somebody else's problem.

A city helicopter cudgeled the air overhead, maybe bringing in Carmody, West's immediate superior. Helicoptering in and out was a perk of the top brass during Winter Hiatus. But Carmody was really paying for his key to the helipad on the roof. The city's blood appetite was growing. Carmody's new job was to set things up so that a busload of daytrippers could vanish into thin air every other week without anybody making a fuss about it. Now how the hell do you pull off something like that? West shook his head, glad it was Carmody's problem and not his.

Morgan's problem hadn't been his, either. Morgan's trouble was he felt for the jazz fans he was putting in harm's way. Didn't he like the stuff himself? So the job got to him and he tried to cut out. But you don't eat the city's bread and run. The boys in the yellow slickers nailed him in the Holland Tunnel. West had heard enough stories to know what happened next. You get pushed face first from a moving car minus your wallet and shoes and end up sharing rat-on-a-stick over burning garbage with three guys that look as bad as you do and smell worse in some basement in a looted and burned-out neighborhood where even the pigeons don't come any more.

There was automatic-weapons fire down a side street around the police station. The firemen had the place surrounded. As West dashed by, he caught the flash of an antitank gun aimed at the precinct door. The firemen must have faked that armory four-alarmer for stuff like that. Their grudge against the boys in blue was an old one.

West's foursome reached their corner and turned onto the street. But what they saw stopped them cold, panting and cursing quietly. Last week a discussion on Predestination at the theological semi-

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nary across from City Hall Annex turned into a riot that might have spilled out into the street if the police and firemen hadn't forced it back inside. But there were no truncheons or water cannons today. After looting the shops on the street to build a bonfire, the rampaging student factions were manhandling passers-by, the one side forcing them to sing "Que Sera, Sera," the other "I Did It My Way," while they lugged out armfuls of the seminary library to feed the flames.

West's people waited for him to decide if they were going to turn back. The local Doberman lady eyed them from the doorway of the boarded-up coffee shop on the corner, looking as if she'd just crawled out of a hole. The woman smiled, showing her empty gums. As if on cue, her five dogs supplied the teeth.

West had to go in. This morning was his weekly meeting with Carmody. "I'm good for twenty," he said. The others came up with thirty between them. It wasn't enough.

Another voice said, "I'm in." It was the Hyena, offering a smile and a twenty. West hadn't known the guy worked at the City Hall Annex.

The woman stuffed the money into her skirt and ordered, "Okay, boys, give old Gracie a cuddle." West, his people, and the Hyena huddled around her as she doled out the dog leashes. The five snarling animals formed a moving circle and escorted them through the theological fury and over to the Annex's sandbagged entrance. The security people opened the iron grille wide enough to pull them through.

West hurried upstairs to his small, doorless office. All the inside doors had gone to board up the windows or to make beds for sleepovers in the cafeteria if things got too hairy. He'd had the office to himself since the day Morelli went screaming down the hall tearing his clothes off and had to be sent away.

West sat down at his desk. A moment later the coffee cart arrived, the attendant's sloppy grin announcing they'd issued another brandy ration because of the trouble outside. West sipped at the three fingers of cheap, hacksaw-edged liquid in the styrofoam cup. When it was gone, he turned his back to the doorway and poised his pen as if he was working.

The distance to Happy Valley Lodge was flexible, depending on how long West wanted to walk. The sun had slipped below the treetops, leaving the gibbous specter of the moon to accompany him like

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a ghostly assistant, an Igor to his Frankenstein. He passed a yard where children with well modulated voices played graceful Happy Valley games. Here at least was a corner of the world you could bring children into. Here even darkness was a friend.

Suddenly West thought he saw someone cross the road a block ahead of him and disappear down a side street. "Fran!" he called and broke into a run. But when he reached the corner, she was gone. Looking back the way she'd come, he recognized Colonel Ramsay's street.

West walked until he reached the two stone pillars topped with lanterns at the foot of the Ramsay driveway. Hudson was on duty, dressed like a gardener, pretending to be putting down mulch on a flowerbed. He returned West's nod with a smile. West knew there would be another man watching from the house.

He found Ramsay in the dim around back, a large, rather overweight old man down on his knees classifying a freshly dug pile of dahlia roots with an indelible pencil by the light of a kerosene lantern. "My dear chap, what a pleasure to see you," said Ramsay as the new arrival helped him to his feet. "And I you, sir," said West, marveling to himself how he always seemed to acquire an English accent around Ramsay. The old man paused a moment to brush off his knees before saying, "Is it getting bad, old man?"

"Yes, sir. Very bad," said West.

Ramsay's sympathetic look changed quickly to a frown. "Still, isn't it a bit early to be drinking?"

"There was a brandy ration, sir. They might have become suspicious if I hadn't taken it."

Ramsay looked relieved. "Quite so," he said. "I hope you understand how vital they are to us, those reports of yours. Information from the very belly of the beast." He put a hand on West's shoulder. "Just hold out a few months longer. A year. Two at the most. Doctor Vasco's going great guns with his creep-deflection ray. We'll be in production within—"

"Sir, I thought I saw my wife just now."

Ramsay looked away. "I was afraid you had," he said. He pursed his lips and added, "All right, Fran is working for us, too. Mayor Farr and the town council had to be sure you wouldn't betray us. We've only survived this long because the city doesn't suspect we're here. So Fran was ordered to meet and marry you. The falling-in-love part was her own idea. But she thinks the city's become too

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dangerous for you. She came here just now to plead with me to order you home."

Ramsay shook his head. "I wish we could, old man," he said. "But when the creep-deflector devices are in place, the city will slide right around us without even knowing we're here. Then you can both come back for good. And we can tell the whole town what you've risked for us all—you and a few others. The Few, that's what they'll call you. They'll sing songs about you at the Widget factory. And one day when the cities have all crept together and ground themselves to powder, we will emerge, a little island of sanity amid the asphalt madness."

Colonel Ramsay gestured toward the horizon. "And then the sound of the jackhammer will ring out across the land as we reclaim the fertile soil beneath parking lot, freeway, and—"

Someone knocked on the doorjamb. West jumped and swung around in his chair. The Hyena was standing there with a stack of files and a desk calendar under his arm. He smiled and introduced himself. "Mr. Carmody told me to bunk in here. Said you could use a hand."

West went cold inside. Was this it? Was he the one the Hyena expected to replace in the foursome? He forced a smile. "The more the merrier," he said.

"Hey, I like your work," said the Hyena, flapping the arm with the files. "My favorite's that joint promotion with Air India, the Indian Tourist Bureau, and the Sabu film festival at the Museum of Modern Art: HIMALAYANS CHEER CABBIE HERO RETURNING SACRED EYE OF GODDESS." They both laughed.

West took some comfort from the laughter. Maybe he was getting paranoid. "Did Carmody show you my latest—the Melba Dinwittie one?" he asked. "What did you think?"

The Hyena busied himself arranging his things on the empty desk. His faint "Hey, great" stayed with West in the elevator all the way up to his boss's office on the twenty-eighth floor.

Goddamn it, Melba Dinwittie was good stuff. There she was, delegated by her church to come to the city to buy a second-hand Nutley Trill-Master organ. To her horror, the Nutley man informs her that the congregation's five years of pot-luck dinners and bake sales still came up a thousand shy of the price of a used Trill-Master. In the cab returning to the hotel, she tells her woes to the kindly driver. She's so distraught by things she leaves her purse with the church-

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organ money in the back seat of the taxi. What shall she do? How can she ever face the congregation again? She passes a sleepless, tearful night. But come dawn the desk calls to inform her that a few moments before, some cab driver had returned her purse and gone away without leaving a name. Melba Dinwittie flies downstairs. Not only is the church money intact, but someone has added the extra thousand needed to buy the organ!

West stepped from the elevator and strode down the hall to Carmody's office. All right, so maybe Melba Dinwittie wasn't in a class with the Sacred Eye of the Goddess. But it was a solid piece of work with a nice little twist at the end.

West found Carmody standing at a window, looking out across the city and rattling the change in his trouser pocket. He was a nervous, balding little man. At his desk, he was constantly picking things up and putting them back down. Carmody turned from the window and gave West his hurt-puppy-dog look. Why was West forcing him to be the heavy? "Melba Dinwittie won't hack it. Not by a long shot," he said, glancing at the ceiling. "The big boys upstairs couldn't swallow that extra thousand. They think you've lost your touch. Know what? So do I. I can't carry you any longer, kid. I've got my own problems. Like how to make goddamn busloads of goddamn daytrippers vanish without nobody blinking a goddamn eye." He rattled his pocket change again, his thoughts on his own troubles, waiting for West to speak.

West worked his lips but nothing came out.

Carmody said, "But I'm not leaving you high and dry. You just need a break from the pressure. I've been checking around. There's an opening over in B Block."

West found his voice. "For what, pushing a coffee cart?" He knew what that meant. On coffee-cart pay he'd have to move back to the city. Fran had as much as told him she'd walk out the door before she'd do that. So there he'd be, alone and holing up in a cubicle at the Y and going sloppy, nipping the brandy and missing days. And when you'd missed enough, the City cut you loose. After that, it's three squares from a dumpster, sleeping in a cardboard box, wearing your socks until they dissolved into slime in your shoes, and never daring to look at the desperate thing shuffling along next to you when you pass a store window.

"So big deal," said Carmody heartily, going over and sitting down at his desk. "So you push some cart. Meanwhile, I'm looking around. I'll find you another slot when you're rested. When you're up to it."

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West took his boss's place at the window. Somewhere down by the docks, a thick column of oily black smoke from a chemical fire coiled up into the grey sky. Well, this was it, he told himself, time for a big career decision, time for the singing to stop at the Widget factory. West turned from the window. "I'm up to it now," he insisted. "Give me the goddamn busloads of goddamn daytrippers."

Carmody raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I'm listening," he said.

"So let's meet Cyrus Dumple, daytripper," began West, the words falling from his mouth with the ease of a public-relations man fighting for his life. "Dumple and his wife and forty other members of the Jolly Oldsters Club of Chickentown, Pennsylvania, have charter-bused it into the city for a day of shopping, the Radio City Musical Hall matinee, and early dinner at Mama Leone's. But Dumple decides he doesn't want Italian, so he strikes out on his own to try one of those Rockefeller Center places where you can eat and watch the skaters.

"Now Dumple knows full well that the bus that picks them up again in front of the Winter Garden Theater between seven and seven-ten won't wait for the tardy—but he underestimates the distance back and is a few minutes late as the theater marquee hoves into view. But what's this heading toward him? It's his bus! But now it has the words HAPPY VALLEY EXPRESS in the panel above the windshield. As it passes, Dumple sees the Jolly Oldsters out in the aisle dancing as spry as you please to the music of a live combo. He runs out into the street, shouting and waving his hands over his head, chasing after it.

"He catches up as the bus slows in crosstown traffic. He jumps and slams his hand against a window, trying to attract somebody's attention, and catches a glimpse of his wife laughing at something Warren Rupp, the retired insurance man, says. Before Dumple can jump again, the traffic is moving and the bus glides forward. Dumple runs after it, shouting, 'Wait for me! Oh, please, wait for me!' But the bus picks up speed, turns the corner, and disappears downtown." West folded his arms and looked at Carmody.

His boss picked up his letter opener, looked at it, and put it back down on the desk. "I don't get it," he said flatly. "What the hell's Happy Valley?"

West told him. One by one, he gave up each of his creations: Mr. Vining, the railroad conductor; Colonel Ramsay, the dotty old dahlia grower who thought he was a spymaster; Mayor Farr; Dr. Vasco, the crackpot inventor; the Blandish twins; Cedric Loomis, the bari-

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tone; the waitress at Happy Valley Lodge who loved him. He named each quiet street, described the principal buildings and landmarks, told what it looked like on a winter night when the lights from the houses colored the snow and how the honeysuckle smelled in the summer darkness.

"Sounds like my kind of place, kid," admitted Carmody a touch wistfully. "But, like they say, so what?"

"So we've got our work cut out for us, spreading the word about this wonderful Shangri-la of ours. I see lots of magazine articles and picture spreads: Small Town America Alive and Well in Happy Valley. Down Home Food Best for What Ails You, Says Cancer Specialist Praising Happy Valley Cookbook."

Carmody got the idea. " 'A Voice in a Million, Modest Cedric Loomis, Unsung Village Nightingale,' " he suggested.

West nodded, adding, " 'The Ramsay Dahlia: Doubtless God Could Have Made a More Beautiful Flower but Doubtless He Never Did.' "

"I like it," grinned Carmody.

"And how about we play up His Honor Otis Farr, Mayor of Happy Valley, Cracker-Barrel Philosopher—slash—Nobel Peace Prize Nominee?" said West. "We hire some actor for the part. There's one of the Fruit-of-the-Loom boys who might just fill the bill. And we get a CUNY prof to write his stuff—things like 'Those who think history repeats itself will be forced to relive it.' "

Carmody leaped to his feet. "How about 'I've never met a payroll I didn't like?' " He punched the air and shouted, "I love it! We're talking Donahue at least. Maybe even Johnny. By the time we're done, we'll have every dumb sucker in the world thinking the ones who disappear are the lucky ones. They'll go to their graves wishing it'd been them on those buses!" He grabbed the phone. "I'm taking this one upstairs to the big boys right now."

As Carmody spoke into the receiver, West turned back to the window. Well, it was done. It was all over. He saw his sad face in the glass and smiled at it. You poor, stupid bastard, he told himself, where'd you get off thinking you were cut out to be one of the Few?

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A dissenting answer to the popularly accepted perception of Goldilocks by the late lamented Roald Dahl, whose wicked fiction has delighted adults and *children from "Lamb to the Slaughter" (EQMM, April 1955) to* Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, *and whose adapted stories began the first season of the popular syndicated series, some years ago now,* Tales of the Unexpected, *from Anglia Television . . .*

GOLDILOCKS AND THE THREE BEARS

by ROALD DAHL

This famous wicked little tale
Should never have been put on sale.
It is a mystery to me
Why loving parents cannot see
That this is actually a book
About a brazen little crook.
Had I the chance I wouldn't fail
To clap young Goldilocks in jail.
Now just imagine how *you'd* feel
If you had cooked a lovely meal,
Delicious porridge, steaming hot,
Fresh coffee in the coffeepot,
With maybe toast and marmalade,
The table beautifully laid,
One place for you and one for Dad,
Another for your little lad.
Then Dad cries, "Golly-gosh! Gee-whiz!
Oh, cripes! How hot this porridge is!
Let's take a walk along the street
Until it's cool enough to eat."

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He adds, "An early-morning stroll
Is good for people on the whole.
It makes your appetite improve,
It also helps your bowels to move."
No proper wife would dare to question
Such a sensible suggestion,
Above all not at breakfast time
When men are seldom in their prime.

No sooner are you down the road
Than Goldilocks, that little toad,
That nosey thieving little louse,
Comes sneaking in your empty house.
She looks around. She quickly notes
Three bowls brimful of porridge-oats.
And while still standing on her feet,
She grabs a spoon and starts to eat.
I say again, how *would* you feel
If you had made this lovely meal
And some delinquent little tot
Broke in and gobbled up the lot?
But wait! That's not the worst of it!
Now comes the distressing bit.
You are, of course, a house-proud wife,
And all your happy married life
You have collected lovely things
Like gilded cherubs wearing wings,
And furniture by Chippendale
Bought at some famous auction sale.
But your most special valued treasure,
The piece that gives you endless pleasure,
Is one small children's dining chair,
Elizabethan, very rare.
It is, in fact, your joy and pride,
Passed down to you on Grandma's side.
But Goldilocks, like many freaks,
Does not appreciate antiques.
She doesn't care, she doesn't mind,
And now she plonks her fat behind
Upon this dainty precious chair,
And crunch! It busts beyond repair.

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A nice girl would at once exclaim,
"Oh, dear! Oh, heavens! What a shame!"
Not Goldie. She begins to swear.
She bellows, "What a lousy chair!"
And uses *one* disgusting word
That luckily you've never heard.
(I dare not write it, even hint it.
Nobody would ever print it.)
You'd think by now this little skunk
Would have the sense to do a bunk.
But, no, I very much regret
She hasn't nearly finished yet.
Deciding she would like a rest,
She says, "Let's see which bed is best."
Upstairs she goes and tries all three.
(Here comes the next catastrophe.)
Most educated people choose
To rid themselves of socks and shoes
Before they clamber into bed.
But Goldie didn't give a shred.
Her filthy shoes were thick with grime,
And mud and mush and slush and slime.
Worse still, upon the heel of one
Was something that a dog had done.
I say once more, what *would* you think
If all this horrid dirt and stink
Was smeared upon your eiderdown
By this revolting little clown.
(The famous story has no clues
To show the girl removed her shoes.)

Oh, what a tale of crime on crime!
Let's check it for a second time.
Crime One, the prosecution's case:
She breaks and enters someone's place.
Crime Two, the prosecutor notes:
She steals a bowl of porridge-oats.
Crime Three: She breaks a precious chair
Belonging to the Baby Bear.
Crime Four: She smears each spotless sheet
With filthy messes from her feet.

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A judge would say without a blink,
"Ten years' hard labor in the clink!"
But in the book, as you will see,
The little beast gets off scot-free,
While tiny children near and far
Shout "Goody-good! Hooray! Hurrah!"
"Poor darling Goldilocks!" they say,
"Thank goodness that she got away!"
Myself, I think I'd rather send
Young Goldie to a sticky end:
"Oh, Daddy!" cried the Baby Bear,
"My porridge gone! It isn't fair!"
"Then go upstairs," the Big Bear said,
"Your porridge is upon the bed.
But as it's inside mademoiselle,
You'll have to eat *her* up as well."

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The simple truth, simply said, from Ellery Queen's introduction to First Prize Winner Number 10 in EQMM's 13 annual contests is that Stanley Ellin never wrote an undistinguished short story . . .

THE MOMENT OF DECISION

by STANLEY ELLIN

Hugh Lozier was the exception to the rule that people who are completely sure of themselves cannot be likable. We have all met the sure ones, of course—those controlled by penetrating voices which cut through all others in a discussion, those hard forefingers jabbing home opinions on your chest, those living Final Words on all issues—and I imagine we all share the same amalgam of dislike and envy for them. Dislike, because no one likes to be shouted down or prodded in the chest, and envy, because everyone wishes he himself were so rich in self-assurance that he could do the shouting down and the prodding.

For myself, since my work took me regularly to certain places in this atomic world where the only state was confusion and the only steady employment that of splitting political hairs, I found absolute judgments harder and harder to come by. Hugh once observed of this that it was a good thing my superiors in the Department were not cut of the same cloth, because God knows what would happen to the country then. I didn't relish that, but—and there was my curse again—I had to grant him his right to say it.

Despite this, and despite the fact that Hugh was my brother-in-law—a curious relationship when you come to think of it—I liked him immensely, just as everyone else did who knew him. He was a big good-looking man, with clear blue eyes in a ruddy face, and with a quick, outgoing nature eager to appreciate whatever you had to

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offer. He was overwhelmingly generous, and his generosity was of that rare and excellent kind which makes you feel as if you are doing the donor a favor by accepting it.

I wouldn't say he had any great sense of humor, but plain good humor can sometimes be an adequate substitute for that, and in Hugh's case it was. His stormy side was largely reserved for those times when he thought you might have needed his help in something and failed to call on him for it. Which meant that ten minutes after Hugh had met you and liked you, you were expected to ask him for anything he might be able to offer. A month or so after he married my sister Elizabeth, she mentioned to him my avid interest in a fine Copley he had hanging in his gallery at Hilltop, and I can still vividly recall my horror when it suddenly arrived, heavily crated and with his gift card attached, at my barren room-and-a-half. It took considerable effort, but I finally managed to return it to him by foregoing the argument that the picture was undoubtedly worth more than the entire building in which I lived and by complaining that it simply didn't show to advantage on my wall. I think he suspected I was lying, but being Hugh he would never dream of charging me with that in so many words.

Of course, Hilltop and the two hundred years of Lozier tradition that went into it did much to shape Hugh this way. The first Loziers had carved the estate from the heights overlooking the river, had worked hard and flourished exceedingly; in successive generations had invested their income so wisely that money and position eventually erected a towering wall between Hilltop and the world outside. Truth to tell, Hugh was very much a man of the Eighteenth Century who somehow found himself in the Twentieth and simply made the best of it.

Hilltop itself was almost a replica of the celebrated but long untenanted Dane house nearby and was striking enough to open anybody's eyes at a glance. The house was weathered stone, graceful despite its bulk, and the vast lawns reaching to the river's edge were tended with such fanatic devotion over the years that they had become carpets of purest green which magically changed luster under any breeze. Gardens ranged from the other side of the house down to the groves which half hid the stables and outbuildings, and past the far side of the groves ran the narrow road which led to town. The road was a courtesy road, each estate holder along it maintaining his share, and I think it safe to say that for all the

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crushed rock he laid in it Hugh made less use of it by far than any of his neighbors.

Hugh's life was bound up in Hilltop; he could be made to leave it only by dire necessity; and if you did meet him away from it you were made acutely aware that he was counting off the minutes until he could return. And if you weren't wary, you would more than likely find yourself going along with him when he did return, and totally unable to tear yourself away from the place while the precious weeks rolled by. I know. I believe I spent more time at Hilltop than at my own apartment after my sister brought Hugh into the family.

At one time I wondered how Elizabeth took to this marriage, considering that before she met Hugh she had been as restless and flighty as she was pretty. When I put the question to her directly, she said, "It's wonderful, darling. Just as wonderful as I knew it would be when I first met him."

It turned out that their first meeting had taken place at an art exhibition, a showing of some ultramodern stuff, and she had been intently studying one of the more bewildering creations on display when she became aware of this tall, good-looking man staring at her. And, as she put it, she had been about to set him properly in his place when he said abruptly, "Are you admiring that?"

This was so unlike what she had expected that she was taken completely aback. "I don't know," she said weakly. "Am I supposed to?"

"No," said the stranger, "it's damned nonsense. Come along now and I'll show you something which isn't a waste of time."

"And," Elizabeth said to me, "I came along like a pup at his heels, while he marched up and down and told me what was good and what was bad, and in a good loud voice, too, so that we collected quite a crowd along the way. Can you picture it, darling?"

"Yes," I said, "I can." By now I had shared similar occasions with Hugh and learned at first hand that nothing could dent his cast-iron assurance.

"Well," Elizabeth went on, "I must admit that at first I was a little put off, but then I began to see that he knew exactly what he was talking about, and that he was terribly sincere. Not a bit self-conscious about anything, but just eager for me to understand things the way he did. It's the same way with everything. Everybody else in the world is always fumbling and bumbling over deciding anything—what to order for dinner, or how to manage his job, or whom to vote for—but Hugh always *knows*. It's *not* knowing that makes

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for all those nerves and complexes and things you hear about, isn't that so? Well, I'll take Hugh, thank you, and leave everyone else to the psychiatrists."

So there it was. An Eden with flawless lawns and no awful nerves and complexes, and not even the glimmer of a serpent in the offing. That is, not a glimmer until the day Raymond made his entrance on the scene.

We were out on the terrace that day, Hugh and Elizabeth and I, slowly being melted into a sort of liquid torpor by the August sunshine, and all of us too far gone to make even a pretense at talk. I lay there with a linen cap over my face, listening to the summer noises around me and being perfectly happy.

There was the low steady hiss of the breeze through the aspens nearby, the plash and drip of oars on the river below, and now and then the melancholy *tink-tunk* of a sheep bell from one of the flock on the lawn. The flock was a fancy of Hugh's. He swore that nothing was better for a lawn than a few sheep grazing on it, and every summer five or six fat and sleepy ewes were turned out on the grass to serve this purpose and to add a pleasantly pastoral note.

My first warning of something amiss came from the sheep—from the sudden sound of their bells clanging wildly and then a baa-ing which suggested an assault by a whole pack of wolves. I heard Hugh say, "Damn!" loudly and angrily, and I opened my eyes to see something more incongruous than wolves. It was a large black poodle in a full glory of a clownish haircut, a bright-red collar, and an ecstasy of high spirits as he chased the frightened sheep around the lawn. It was clear the poodle had no intention of hurting them—he probably found them the most wonderful playmates imaginable—but it was just as clear that the panicky ewes didn't understand this and would very likely end up in the river before the fun was over.

In the bare second it took me to see all this, Hugh had already leaped the low terrace wall and was among the sheep, herding them away from the water's edge and shouting commands at the dog, which had different ideas. "Down, boy!" he yelled. "Down!" And then as he would to one of his own hounds he sternly commanded, "Heel!"

He would have done better, I thought, to have picked up a stick or stone and made a threatening gesture, since the poodle paid no attention whatever to Hugh's words. Instead, continuing to bark happily, the poodle made for the sheep again, this time with Hugh in futile pursuit. An instant later, the dog was frozen into immobil-

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ity by a voice from among the aspens near the edge of the lawn.

"Asseyez!" the voice called breathlessly. *"Asseyez-vous!"*

Then the man appeared, a small dapper figure trotting across the grass. Hugh stood waiting, his face darkening as we watched.

Elizabeth squeezed my arm. "Let's get down there," she whispered. "Hugh doesn't like being made a fool of."

We got there in time to hear Hugh open his big guns. "Any man," he was saying, "who doesn't know how to train an animal to its place shouldn't own one."

The man's face was all polite attention. It was a good face, thin and intelligent, and webbed with tiny lines at the corners of the eyes. There was also something behind those eyes that couldn't quite be masked. A gentle mockery. A glint of wry perception turned on the world like a camera lens. It was nothing anyone like Hugh would have noticed, but it was there all the same, and I found myself warming to it on the spot.

There was also something tantalizingly familiar about the newcomer's face, his high forehead, and his thinning grey hair, but much as I dug into my memory during Hugh's long and solemn lecture I couldn't come up with an answer. The lecture ended with a few remarks on the best methods of dog training, and by then it was clear that Hugh was working himself into a mood of forgiveness.

"As long as there's no harm done," he said, and paused.

The man nodded soberly. "Still, to get off on the wrong foot with one's new neighbors—"

Hugh looked startled. "Neighbors?" he said almost rudely. "You mean that you live around here?"

The man waved toward the aspens. "On the other side of those woods."

"The *Dane* house?" The Dane house was almost as sacred to Hugh as Hilltop, and he had once explained to me that if he were ever offered a chance to buy the place he would snap it up. His tone now was not so much wounded as incredulous. "I don't believe it!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," the man assured him, "the Dane house. I performed there at a party many years ago and always hoped that someday I might own it."

It was the word *performed* which gave me my clue—that and the accent barely perceptible under the precise English. He had been born and raised in Marseilles—that would explain the accent—and long before my time he had already become a legend.

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"You're Raymond, aren't you?" I said. "Charles Raymond."

"I prefer Raymond alone." He smiled in deprecation of his own small vanity. "And I am flattered that you recognize me."

I don't believe he really was. Raymond the Magician, Raymond the Great, would, if anything, expect to be recognized wherever he went. As the master of sleight of hand who had paled Thurston's star, as the escape artist who had almost outshone Houdini, Raymond would not be inclined to underestimate himself.

He had started with the standard box of tricks which makes up the repertoire of most professional magicians; he had gone far beyond that to those feats of escape which, I suppose, are known to us all by now. The lead casket sealed under a foot of lake ice, the welded-steel straitjackets, the vaults of the Bank of England, the exquisite suicide knot which noosed throat and doubled legs together so that the motion of a leg draws the noose tighter around the throat—all these Raymond had escaped from. And then at the pinnacle of fame he had dropped from sight and his name had become relegated to the past.

When I asked him why, he shrugged.

"A man works for money or for the love of his work," he said. "If he has all the wealth he needs and has no more love for his work, why go on?"

"But to give up a great career—" I protested.

"It was enough to know that the house was waiting here."

"You mean," Elizabeth said, "that you never intended to live anyplace but here?"

"Never—not once in all these years." He laid a finger along his nose and winked broadly at us. "Of course, I made no secret of this to the Dane estate, and when the time came for them to sell I was the first and only one approached."

"You don't give up an idea easily," Hugh said in an edged voice.

Raymond laughed. "Idea? It became an obsession, really. Over the years I traveled to many parts of the world, but no matter how fine the place, I knew it couldn't be as fine as that house on the edge of the woods there, with the river at its feet and the hills beyond. Someday, I would tell myself, when my travels are done, I will come here and, like Candide, cultivate my garden."

He ran his hand abstractedly over the poodle's head and looked around with an air of great satisfaction. "And now," he said, "here I am . . ."

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Here he was, indeed, and it quickly became clear that his arrival was working a change on Hilltop. Or, since Hilltop was so completely a reflection of Hugh, it was clear that a change was being worked on Hugh. He became irritable and restless, and more aggressively sure of himself than ever. The warmth and good nature were still there—they were as much part of him as his arrogance—but he now had to work a little harder at them. He reminded me of a man who is bothered by a speck in the eye, but can't find it and must get along with it as best he can.

Raymond, of course, was the speck, and I got the impression at times that he rather enjoyed the role. It would have been easy enough for him to stay close to his own house and cultivate his garden, or paste up his album, or whatever retired performers do, but he evidently found that impossible. He had a way of drifting over to Hilltop at odd times, just as Hugh was led to find his way to the Dane house and spend long and troublesome sessions there.

Both of them must have known that they were so badly suited to each other that the easy and logical solution would have been to stay apart. But they had the affinity of negative and positive forces, and when they were in a room together the crackling of the antagonistic current between them was so strong you could almost see it in the air.

Any subject became a point of contention for them, and they would duel over it bitterly: Hugh armored and weaponed with his massive assurance, Raymond flicking away with a rapier, trying to find a chink in the armor. I think that what annoyed Raymond most was the discovery that there was no chink in Hugh's armor. As someone with an obvious passion for searching out all sides to all questions, and for going deep into motives and causes, Raymond was continually being outraged by Hugh's single-minded way of laying down the law.

He didn't hesitate to let Hugh know that. "You are positively medieval," he said. "And of all things men should have learned since that time, the biggest is that there are no easy answers, no solutions one can give with a snap of the fingers. I can only hope for you that someday you may be faced with the perfect dilemma, the unanswerable question. You would find that a revelation. You would learn more in that minute than you dreamed possible."

And Hugh did not make matters any better when he coldly answered, "And *I* say that for any man with a brain and the courage to use it there is no such thing as a perfect dilemma."

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It may be that this was the sort of episode that led to the trouble that followed, or it may be that Raymond acted out of the most innocent and aesthetic motives possible. But, whatever the motives, the results were inevitable and dangerous.

They grew from the project Raymond outlined for us in great detail one afternoon. Now that he was living in the Dane house, he had discovered that it was too big, too overwhelming. "Like a museum," he explained. "I find myself wandering through it like a lost soul through endless galleries."

The grounds also needed landscaping. The ancient trees were handsome but, as Raymond put it, there were just too many of them. "Literally," he said, "I cannot see the river for the trees, and I am one devoted to the sight of running water."

Altogether there would be drastic changes. Two wings of the house would come down, the trees would be cleared away to make a broad aisle to the water, the whole place would be enlivened. It would no longer be a museum, but the perfect home he had envisioned over the years.

At the start of this recitative Hugh was slouched comfortably in his chair. Then, as Raymond drew the vivid picture of what was to be, Hugh sat up straighter and straighter until he was as rigid as a trooper in the saddle. His lips compressed. His face became blood-red. His hands clenched and unclenched in a slow, deadly rhythm. Only a miracle was restraining him from an open outburst, but it was not the kind of miracle to last. I saw from Elizabeth's expression that she understood this, too, but was as helpless as I to do anything about it. And when Raymond, after painting the last glowing strokes of his description, said complacently, "Well, now, what do you think?" there was no holding Hugh.

He leaned forward with deliberation and said, "Do you really want to know what I think?"

"Now, Hugh," Elizabeth said in alarm. "Please, Hugh—"

He brushed that aside.

"Do you really want to know?"

Raymond frowned. "Of course."

"Then I'll tell you," Hugh said. He took a deep breath. "I think that nobody but a damned iconoclast could even conceive the atrocity you're proposing. I think you're one of those people who takes pleasure in smashing apart anything that's stamped with tradition or stability. You'd kick the props from under the whole world if you could!"

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"I beg your pardon," Raymond said. He was very pale and angry. "But I think you are confusing change with destruction. Surely you must comprehend that I don't intend to destroy anything but only wish to make some necessary changes."

"Necessary?" Hugh gibed. "Rooting up a fine stand of trees that's been there for centuries? Ripping apart a house that's as solid as a rock? *I* call it wanton destruction."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. To refresh a scene, to reshape it—"

"I have no intention of arguing," Hugh cut in. "I'm telling you straight out that you don't have the right to tamper with that property!"

They were on their feet now, facing each other truculently, and the only thing that kept me from being really frightened was the conviction that Hugh would not become violent, and that Raymond was far too level-headed to lose his temper. Then the threatening moment was magically past. Raymond's lips suddenly quirked in amusement and he studied Hugh with courteous interest.

"I see," he said. "I was quite stupid not to have understood at once. This property which I remarked was a little too much like a museum is to remain that way, and I am to be its custodian. A caretaker of the past, one might say, a curator of its relics."

He shook his head, smiling. "But I'm afraid I'm not quite suited to that role. I lift my hat to the past, it is true, but I prefer to court the present. For that reason I will go ahead with my plans, and hope they do not make an obstacle to our friendship."

I remember thinking, when I left next day for the city and a long hot week at my desk, that Raymond had carried off the affair very nicely and that, thank God, it had gone no further than it did. So I was completely unprepared for Elizabeth's call at the end of the week.

It was awful, she said. It was the business of Hugh and Raymond and the Dane house, but worse than ever. She was counting on my coming down to Hilltop the next day; there couldn't be any question about that. She had planned a way of clearing up the whole thing, but I simply had to be there to back her up. After all, I was one of the few people Hugh would listen to and she was depending on me.

"Depending on me for what?" I said. I didn't like the sound of it. "And as for Hugh's listening to me, Elizabeth, isn't that stretching it a good deal? I can't see him wanting my advice on his personal affairs."

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"If you're going to be touchy about it—"

"I'm *not* touchy about it," I retorted. "I just don't like getting mixed up in this thing. Hugh's quite capable of taking care of himself."

"Maybe too capable."

"And what does that mean?"

"Oh, I can't explain now," she wailed. "I'll tell you everything tomorrow. And, darling, if you have any brotherly feelings you'll be here on the morning train. Believe me, it's serious."

I arrived on the morning train in a bad state. My imagination is one of the overactive kind that can build a cosmic disaster out of very little material, and by the time I arrived at the house I was prepared for almost anything.

But, on the surface at least, all was serene. Hugh greeted me warmly, Elizabeth was her cheerful self, and we had an amiable lunch and a long talk which never came near the subject of Raymond or the Dane house. I said nothing about Elizabeth's phone call, but thought of it with a steadily growing sense of outrage until I was alone with her.

"Now," I said, "I'd like an explanation of all this mystery. The Lord knows what I expected to find out here, but it certainly wasn't anything I've seen so far. And I'd like some accounting for the bad time you've given me since that call."

"All right," she said grimly, "and that's what you'll get. Come along."

She led the way on a long walk through the gardens and past the stables and outbuildings. Near the private road which lay beyond the last grove of trees she suddenly said, "When the car drove you up to the house, didn't you notice anything strange about this road?"

"No, I didn't."

"I suppose not. The driveway to the house turns off too far away from here. But now you'll have a chance to see for yourself."

I did see for myself. A chair was set squarely in the middle of the road and on the chair sat a stout man placidly reading a magazine. I recognized the man at once: he was one of Hugh's stablehands, and he had the patient look of someone who has been sitting for a long time and expects to sit a good deal longer. It took me only a second to realize what he was there for, but Elizabeth wasn't leaving anything to my deductive powers. When we walked over to him the man stood up and grinned at us.

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"William," Elizabeth said, "would you mind telling my brother what instructions Mr. Lozier gave you?"

"Sure," the man said cheerfully. "Mr. Lozier told us there was always supposed to be one of us sitting right here, and any truck we saw that might be carrying construction stuff or suchlike for the Dane house was to be stopped and turned back. All we had to do is tell them it's private property and they were trespassing. If they laid a finger on us we just call in the police. That's the whole thing."

"Have you turned back any trucks?" Elizabeth asked for my benefit.

The man looked surprised. "Why, you know that, Mrs. Lozier," he said. "There was a couple of them the first day we were out here, and that was all. There wasn't any fuss, either," he explained to me. "None of those drivers wants to monkey with trespass."

When we were away from the road again, I clapped my hand to my forehead. "It's incredible!" I said. "Hugh must know he can't get away with this. That road is the only one to the Dane place and it's been in public use so long that it isn't private any more!"

Elizabeth nodded. "And that's exactly what Raymond told Hugh a few days back. He came over here in a fury and they had quite an argument about it. And when Raymond said something about hauling Hugh off to court, Hugh answered that he'd be glad to spend the rest of his life in litigation over this business. But that wasn't the worst of it. The last thing Raymond said was that Hugh ought to know that force only invites force, and ever since then I've been expecting a war to break out here any minute. Don't you see? That man blocking the road is a constant provocation, and it scares me."

I could understand that. And the more I considered the matter, the more dangerous it looked.

"But I have a plan," Elizabeth said eagerly, "and that's why I wanted you here. I'm having a dinner party tonight, a very small, informal dinner party. It's to be a sort of peace conference. You'll be there, and Dr. Wynant—Hugh likes you both a great deal—and," she hesitated, "Raymond."

"No!" I said. "You mean he's actually coming?"

"I went over to see him yesterday and we had a long talk. I explained everything to him—about neighbors being able to sit down and come to an understanding, and about brotherly love and—oh, it must have sounded dreadfully inspirational and sticky, but it worked. He said he would be here."

I had a foreboding. "Does Hugh know about this?"

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"About the dinner? Yes."

"I mean, about Raymond's being here."

"No, he doesn't." And then when she saw me looking hard at her she burst out defiantly with, "Well, *something* had to be done and I did it, that's all! Isn't it better than just sitting and waiting for God knows what?"

Until we were all seated around the dining-room table that evening I might have conceded the point. Hugh had been visibly shocked by Raymond's arrival, but then, apart from a sidelong glance at Elizabeth which had volumes written in it, he managed to conceal his feelings well enough. He had made the introductions gracefully, kept up his end of the conversation, and, all in all, did a credible job of playing host.

Ironically, it was the presence of Dr. Wynant which made even this much of a triumph possible for Elizabeth, and which then turned it into disaster. The doctor was an eminent surgeon, stocky and grey-haired, with an abrupt, positive way about him. Despite his own position in the world, he seemed pleased as a schoolboy to meet Raymond, and in no time at all they were as thick as thieves.

It was when Hugh discovered during dinner that nearly all attention was fixed on Raymond and very little on himself that the mantle of good host started to slip and the fatal flaws in Elizabeth's plan showed through. There are people who enjoy entertaining lions and who take pleasure in reflected glory, but Hugh was not one of them. Besides, he regarded the doctor as one of his closest friends, and I have noticed that it is the most assured of men who can be the most jealous of their friendships. And when a prized friendship is being encroached on by the man one loathes more than anyone else in the world—! All in all, by simply imagining myself in Hugh's place and looking across the table at Raymond, who was gaily and unconcernedly holding forth, I was prepared for the worst.

The opportunity for it came to Hugh when Raymond was deep in a discussion of the devices used in effecting escapes. They were innumerable, he said. Almost anything one could seize on would serve as such a device. A wire, a scrap of metal, even a bit of paper—at one time or another, he had used them all.

"But of them all," he said with a sudden solemnity, "there is only one I would stake my life on. Strange, it is one you cannot see, cannot hold in your hand—in fact, for many people it doesn't even

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exist. Yet it is the one I have used most often and which has never failed me."

The doctor leaned forward, his eyes bright with interest. "And it is—?"

"It is a knowledge of people, my friend. Or, as it may be put, a knowledge of human nature. To me it is as vital an instrument as the scalpel is to you."

"Oh?" said Hugh, and his voice was so sharp that all eyes were instantly turned on him. "You make sleight of hand sound like a department of psychology."

"Perhaps," Raymond said, and I saw he was watching Hugh now, gauging him. "You see, there is no great mystery in the matter. My profession—my art, as I like to think of it—is no more than the art of misdirection, and I am but one of its many practitioners."

"I wouldn't say there were many escape artists around nowadays," the doctor remarked.

"True," Raymond said, "but you will observe I referred to the art of misdirection. The escape artist, the master of legerdemain—these are a handful who practice the most exotic form of that art. But what of those who engage in the work of politics, of advertising, of salesmanship?" He laid his finger along his nose in the familiar gesture and winked. "I'm afraid they have all made my art their business."

The doctor smiled. "Since you haven't dragged medicine into it, I'm willing to go along with you," he said. "But what I want to know is, exactly how does this knowledge of human nature work in your profession?"

"In this way," Raymond said. "One must judge a person carefully. Then, if he finds in that person certain weaknesses, he can state a false premise and it will be accepted without question. Once the false premise is swallowed, the rest is easy. The victim will then see only what the magician wants him to see, or will give his vote to that politician, or will buy merchandise because of that advertising." He shrugged. "And that's all there is to it."

"Is it?" Hugh said. "But what happens when you're with people who have some intelligence and won't swallow your false premise? How do you do your tricks then? Or do you keep them on the same level as selling beads to the savages?"

"Now, that's uncalled for, Hugh," the doctor said. "That man's expressing his ideas. No reason to make an issue of them."

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"Maybe there is," Hugh said, his eyes fixed on Raymond. "I have found he's full of interesting ideas. I was wondering how far he'd want to go in backing them up."

Raymond touched the napkin to his lips with a precise little flick, and then laid it carefully on the table before him. "In short," he said, addressing himself to Hugh, "you want a small demonstration of my art."

"It depends," Hugh said. "I don't want any trick cigarette cases or rabbits out of hats or any damn nonsense like that. I'd like to see something good."

"Something good," echoed Raymond reflectively. He looked around the room, studied it, and then turned to Hugh, pointing toward the huge oak door which was closed between the dining room and the living room, where we had gathered before dinner.

"That door is not locked, is it?"

"No," Hugh said, "it isn't. It hasn't been locked for years."

"But there is a key to it?"

Hugh pulled out his key chain and with an effort detached a heavy, old-fashioned key. "Yes, it's the same one we use for the butler's pantry." He was becoming interested despite himself.

"Good. No, don't give it to me. Give it to the doctor. You have faith in the doctor's honor, I am sure?"

"Yes," said Hugh drily, "I have."

"Very well. Now, Doctor, will you please go to that door and lock it."

The doctor marched to the door with his firm, decisive tread, thrust the key into the lock, and turned it. The click of the bolt snapping into place was loud in the silence of the room. The doctor returned to the table holding the key, but Raymond motioned it away. "It must not leave your hand or everything is lost," he warned.

"Now," he said, "for the finale I approach the door, I flick my handkerchief at it"—the handkerchief barely brushed the keyhole—"and, presto, the door is unlocked!"

The doctor went to it. He seized the doorknob, twisted it dubiously, and then watched with genuine astonishment as the door swung silently open.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

"Somehow," Elizabeth laughed, "a false premise went down easy as an oyster."

Only Hugh reflected a sense of personal outrage. "All right," he demanded, "how was it done? How did you work it?"

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"I?" Raymond said reproachfully and smiled at all of us with obvious enjoyment. "It was you who did it. I used only my knowledge of human nature to help you along the way."

I said, "I can guess part of it. That door was set in advance, and when the doctor thought he was locking it, he wasn't. He was really unlocking it. Isn't that the answer?"

Raymond nodded. "Very much the answer. The door *was* locked in advance. I made sure of that, because with a little forethought I suspected there would be such a challenge during the evening, and this was the simplest way of preparing for it. I merely made certain that I was the last one to enter this room, and when I did I used this." He held up his hand so that we could see the sliver of metal in it. "An ordinary skeleton key, of course, but sufficient for an old and primitive lock."

For a moment, Raymond looked grave, then he continued brightly. "It was our host himself who stated the false premise when he said the door was unlocked. He was so sure of himself that he wouldn't think to test anything so obvious. The doctor is also a man who is sure, and he fell into the same trap. It is, as you now see, a little dangerous always to be so sure."

"I'll go along with that," the doctor said ruefully, "even though it's heresy to admit it in my line of work." He playfully tossed the key he'd been holding across the table to Hugh, who let it fall in front of him and made no gesture toward it. "Well, Hugh, like it or not, you must admit the man has proved his point."

"Do I?" said Hugh softly. He sat there smiling a little now, and it was easy to see he was turning some thought over and over in his head.

"Oh, come on, man," the doctor said with some impatience. "You were taken in as much as we were. You know that."

"Of course you were, darling," Elizabeth agreed.

I think that she suddenly saw her opportunity to turn the proceedings into the peace conference she had aimed at, but I could have told her she was choosing her time badly. There was a look in Hugh's eye I didn't like—a veiled look not natural to him. Ordinarily when he was really angered, he would blow up a violent storm, and once the thunder and lightning had passed he would be honestly apologetic. But this present mood of his was different. There was a slumberous quality in it which alarmed me.

He hooked one arm over the back of his chair and rested the other on the table, sitting halfway around to fix his eyes on Raymond. "I

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seem to be a minority of one," he remarked, "but I'm sorry to say I found your little trick disappointing. Not that it wasn't cleverly done—I'll grant that, all right—but because it wasn't any more than you'd expect from a competent blacksmith."

"Now *there's* a large helping of sour grapes," the doctor jeered.

Hugh shook his head. "No, I'm simply saying that where there's a lock on a door and the key to it in your hand, it's no great trick to open it. Considering our friend's reputation, I thought we'd see more from him than that."

Raymond grimaced. "Since I had hoped to entertain," he said, "I must apologize for disappointing."

"Oh, as far as entertainment goes I have no complaints. But for a real test—"

"A real test?"

"Yes, something a little different. Let's say, a door without any locks or keys to tamper with. A closed door which can be opened with a fingertip, but which is nevertheless impossible to open. How does that sound to you?"

Raymond narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, as if he were considering the picture being presented to him. "It sounds most interesting," he said at last. "Tell me more about it."

"No," Hugh said, and from the sudden eagerness in his voice I felt that this was the exact moment he had been looking for. "I'll do better than that. I'll *show* it to you."

He stood up brusquely and the rest of us followed suit—except Elizabeth, who remained in her seat. When I asked her if she wanted to come along, she only shook her head and sat there watching us hopelessly as we left the room.

We were bound for the cellars, I realized when Hugh picked up a flashlight along the way, but for a part of the cellars I had never seen before. On a few occasions, I had gone downstairs to help select a bottle of wine from the racks there, but now we walked past the wine vault and into a long, dimly lit chamber behind it. Our feet scraped loudly on the rough stone, the walls around us showed the stains of seepage, and, warm as the night was outside, I could feel the chill of dampness turning my chest to gooseflesh.

When the doctor shuddered and said hollowly, "These are the very tombs of Atlantis," I knew I wasn't alone in my feeling, and felt some relief at that.

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We stopped at the very end of the chamber, before what I can best describe as a stone closet built from floor to ceiling in the farthest angle of the walls. It was about four feet wide and not quite twice that in length, and its open doorway showed impenetrable blackness inside. Hugh reached into the blackness and pulled a heavy door into place.

"That's it," he said abruptly. "Plain solid wood, four inches thick, fitted flush into the frame so that it's almost airtight. It's a beautiful piece of carpentry, too, the kind they practiced two hundred years ago. And no locks or bolts. Just a ring set into each side to use as a handle." He pushed the door gently and it swung open noiselessly at his touch. "See that? The whole thing is balanced so perfectly on the hinges that it moves like a feather."

"But what's it for?" I asked. "It must have been made for a reason."

Hugh laughed shortly. "It was. Back in the bad old days, when a servant committed a crime—and I don't suppose it had to be more of a crime than talking back to one of the ancient Loziers—he was put in here to repent. And since the air inside was good for only a few hours at the most, he either repented damn soon or not at all."

"And that door?" the doctor said cautiously. "That impressive door of yours which opens at a touch to provide all the air needed—what prevented the servant from opening it?"

"Look," Hugh said. He flashed his light inside the cell and we crowded behind him to peer in. The circle of light reached across the cell to its far wall and picked out a short heavy chain hanging a little above the head level with a U-shaped collar dangling from its bottom link.

"I see," Raymond said, and they were the first words I had heard him speak since we had left the dining room. "It is truly ingenious. The man stands with his back against the wall, facing the door. The collar is placed around his neck, and then—since it is cleverly not made for a lock—it is clamped there, hammered around his neck. The door is closed, and the man spends the next few hours like someone on an invisible rack, reaching out with his feet to catch the ring on the door which is just out of reach. If he's lucky, he may not strangle himself in his iron collar but may live until someone chooses to open the door for him."

"My God," the doctor said. "You make me feel as if I were living through it."

Raymond smiled faintly. "I have lived through many such experiences, and, believe me, the reality is always a little worse than the

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worst imaginings. There is always the ultimate moment of terror, of panic, when the heart pounds so madly you think it will burst through your ribs and the cold sweat soaks clear through you in the space of one breath. That is when you must take yourself in hand, must dispel all weakness, and remember all the lessons you have ever learned. If not—!"

He whisked the edge of his hand across his lean throat. "Unfortunately for the usual victim of such a device," he concluded sadly, "since he lacks the essential courage and knowledge to help himself, he succumbs."

"But *you* wouldn't," Hugh said.

"I have no reason to think so."

"You mean—" and the eagerness was creeping back into Hugh's voice, stronger than ever "—that under the very same conditions as someone chained in there two hundred years ago, you could get this door open?"

The challenging note was too strong to be brushed aside lightly. Raymond stood silent for a long minute, face strained with concentration, before he answered.

"Yes," he said. "It wouldn't be easy—the problem is made formidable by its very simplicity—but it could be solved."

"How long do you think it would take you?"

"An hour at the most."

Hugh had come a long way around to get to this point. He asked the question slowly, savoring it. "Would you want to bet on that?"

"Now, wait a minute," the doctor said. "I don't like any part of this."

"And *I* vote we adjourn for a drink," I put in. "Fun's fun, but we'll all wind up with pneumonia playing games down here."

Neither Hugh nor Raymond appeared to hear a word of this. They stood staring at each other—Hugh waiting on pins and needles, Raymond deliberating—until Raymond said, "What is this bet you offer?"

"This. If you lose, you get out of the Dane house inside of a month, and sell it to me."

"And if I win?"

It wasn't easy for Hugh to say it, but he finally got it out. "Then I'll be the one to get out. And if you don't want to buy Hilltop, I'll arrange to sell it to the first comer."

For anyone who knew Hugh, it was so fantastic, so staggering a statement to hear from him, that none of us could find words at first. It was the doctor who recovered most quickly.

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"You're not speaking for yourself, Hugh," he warned. "You're a married man. Elizabeth's feelings have to be considered."

"Is it a bet?" Hugh demanded of Raymond. "Do you want to go through with it?"

"I think, before I answer that, there's something to be explained." Raymond paused, then went on slowly, "I'm afraid I gave the impression—out of false pride, perhaps—that when I retired from my work it was because of a boredom, a lack of interest in it. That was not altogether the truth. In reality, I was required to go to a doctor some years ago, the doctor listened to the heart, and suddenly my heart became the most important thing in the world. I tell you this because while your challenge strikes me as being a most unusual and interesting way of settling differences between neighbors, I must reject it for reasons of health."

"You were healthy enough a minute ago," Hugh said.

"Perhaps not as much as you would want to think, my friend."

"In other words," Hugh said bitterly, "there's no accomplice handy, no keys in your pocket to help out, and no way of tricking anyone into seeing what isn't there! So you have to admit you're beaten."

Raymond stiffened. "I admit no such thing. All the tools I would need even for such a test as this I have with me. Believe me, they would be enough."

Hugh laughed aloud, and the sound of it broke into small echoes all down the corridors behind us. It was that sound, I am sure—the living contempt in it rebounding from wall to wall around us—which sent Raymond into the cell.

Hugh wielded the hammer, short-handled but heavy sledge, which tightened the collar into a circlet around Raymond's neck, hitting with hard, even strokes at the iron which was braced against the wall. When he was finished, I saw the pale glow of the radium-painted numbers on a watch as Raymond studied it in his pitch darkness.

"It is now eleven," he said calmly. "The wager is that by midnight this door must be opened, and it doesn't matter what means are used. Those are the conditions, and you gentlemen are the witnesses to them."

Then the door was closed—and the walking began.

Back and forth we walked, the three of us, as if we were being compelled to trace every possible geometric figure on that stony

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floor, the doctor with his quick, impatient step and I matching Hugh's long, nervous strides. A foolish, meaningless march, back and forth across our own shadows, each of us marking the time by counting off the passing seconds and each ashamed to be the first to look at his watch.

For a while there was a counterpoint to this scraping of feet from inside the cell. It was a barely perceptible clinking of chain coming at brief, regular intervals. Then there would be a long silence, followed by a renewal of the sound. When it stopped again, I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I held up my watch toward the dim yellowish light of the bulb overhead and saw with dismay that barely twenty minutes had passed.

After that there was no hesitancy in the others about looking at the time, and, if anything, this made it harder to bear than just wondering. I caught the doctor winding his watch with small brisk turns and then a few minutes later try to wind it again and suddenly drop his hand with disgust as he realized he had already done it. Hugh walked with his watch held up near his eyes, as if by concentration on it he could drag that crawling minute-hand faster around the dial.

Thirty minutes had passed.

Forty.

Forty-five.

I remember that when I looked at my watch and saw there were less than fifteen minutes to go I wondered if I could last out even that short time. The chill had sunk so deep into me that I ached with it. I was shocked when I saw that Hugh's face was dripping with sweat and that beads of it gathered while I watched.

It was while I was looking at him in fascination that it happened. The sound broke through the walls of the cell like a wail of agony heard from far away, and shivered over us as if it were spelling out the words.

"Doctor!" it cried. *"The air!"*

It was Raymond's voice, but the thickness of the wall blocking it off turned it into a high thin sound. What was clearest in it was the note of pure terror, the plea growing out of that terror.

"Air!" it screamed, the word bubbling and dissolving into a long-drawn sound which made no sense at all.

And then it was silent.

We leaped for the door together, but Hugh was there first, his back against it, barring the way. In his upraised hand was the

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hammer which had clinched Raymond's collar. "Keep back!" he cried. "Don't come any nearer, I warn you!"

The fury in him, brought home by the menace of the weapon, stopped us in our tracks.

"Hugh," the doctor pleaded, "I know what you're thinking, but you can forget that now. The bet's off and I'm opening the door on my own responsibility. You have my word for that."

"Do I? But do you remember the terms of the bet, Doctor? This door must be opened within an hour—*and it doesn't matter what means are used!* Do you understand now? He's fooling both of you. He's faking a death scene so that you'll push open the door and win his bet for him. But it's my bet, not yours, and I have the last word on it!"

I saw from the way he talked, despite the shaking tension in his voice, that he was in perfect command of himself, and it made everything seem that much worse.

"How do you know he's faking?" I demanded. "The man said he had a heart condition. He said there was always a time in a spot like this when he had to fight panic and could feel the strain of it. What right do you have to gamble with his life?"

"Damn it, don't you see he never mentioned any heart condition until he smelled a bet in the wind? Don't you see he set his trap that way, just as he locked the door behind him when he came to dinner! But this time nobody will spring it for him—nobody!"

"Listen to me," the doctor said, and his voice cracked like a whip. "Do you concede that there's one slim possibility of that man being dead in there, or dying?"

"Yes, it is possible—anything is possible."

"I'm not trying to split hairs with you! I'm telling you that if that man is in trouble, every second counts, and you're stealing that time from him! And if that's the case, by God, I'll sit in the witness chair at your trial and swear you murdered him! Is that what you want?"

Hugh's head sank forward on his chest, but his hand still tightly gripped the hammer. I could hear the breath drawing heavily in his throat, and when he raised his head his face was grey and haggard. The torment of indecision was written in every pale sweating line of it.

And then I suddenly understood what Raymond had meant that day when he told Hugh about the revelation he might find in the face of a perfect dilemma. It was the revelation of what a man may

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learn about himself when he is forced to look into his own depths, and Hugh had found it at last.

In that shadowy cellar, while the relentless seconds thundered louder and louder in our ears, we waited to see what he would do.

EDITORIAL NOTE: Now that you have finished Mr. Ellin's story, you realize that it belongs in the great tradition of "challenge" tales—in the literary stream of Mark Twain's *Awful, Terrible Medieval Romance* (1871), Frank R. Stockton's *The Lady or the Tiger?* (1884), and W. W. Jacobs' *The Lost Ship* (1898). You also realize that Mr. Ellin's story does not merely recreate a riddle of the past, or simply offer a new variation. Actually, it is an *extension* of the great tradition—a 1954 version which, years later, still reveals the most serious dilemma of our time.

Mr. Ellin's story calls for more than the usual "reader participation." Entirely apart from the question of whether Raymond did or did not have a heart condition, we are left with this speculation: What did Hugh decide to do? To win his bet—at any cost, possibly of his very soul? Or to lose the bet—and thus become a man of heart and conscience as well as of brain?

In the sense of posing a problem and giving no solution in the story itself, Mr. Ellin follows in the footsteps of Mark Twain and Frank R. Stockton. But *The Moment of Decision* is not a pure riddle like *Awful, Terrible Medieval Romance* or *The Lady, or the Tiger?* Those earlier classics presented the reader with unanswerable questions: Mr. Ellin's riddle *is* answerable. Readers have but to look into their own hearts: for it is really your dilemma, too—the dilemma of people everywhere—the dilemma of nations, even of civilizations, in this new atomic, men-walking-on-the-moon age.

ELLERY QUEEN

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Purely by coincidence, this month's new books illustrate the amazing variety of fictional sleuths, amateur and professional, currently active. We have an elderly Jewish mother, a now rare example of the Great Detective; the young proprietor of a mystery bookstore; a civil servant in ancient Rome; a Lesbian policewoman; one of that comforting army of good grey British police inspectors; and finally a one-eyed soccer goalie.

*** James Yaffe: *Mom Doth Murder Sleep,* St. Martin's, $16.95. Certain backgrounds are absolute naturals for mystery novels. For example, how many whodunits have concerned productions of William Shakespeare's jinx play *Macbeth,* the name of which theatrical superstition asserts must not be spoken in a theatre, lest bad luck follow? Three that come readily to mind are Marvin Kaye's *Bullets for Macbeth* (1976), the best of the author's Hilary Quayle novels; Ngaio Marsh's *Light Thickens* (1982), the last (and a fine example) of the Roderick Alleyn novels; and Lenore Glen Offord's *Walking Shadow* (1959), a fictional celebration of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. When a Mesa Grande, Colorado, theatre company's production of "the Scottish play" results in on-stage murder, the armchair detective known only as Mom helps her fiftyish son Dave, investigator for the Public Defender's office, and his young assistant Roger solve the case. The telling, with Dave and Roger narrating alternate chapters, demonstrates the author's customary low-key humor, and the Queenian puzzle, featuring a delightfully elongated gathering-of-the-suspects scene, will please readers who still value ingenuity in the detective novel. (Fiftieth anniversary note: Mom made her first appearance in *EQMM* over 39 years ago, in the June 1952 issue, while her creator made his teenage debut 48 years ago, in the July 1943 issue.)

*** Carolyn G. Hart: *The Christie Caper,* Bantam, $18.00. If Yaffe pays subtle homage to EQ with every book, Hart's continuing homage to Agatha Christie has been far less so; it is especially overt in this account of a week-long celebration of the Christie centenary masterminded by mystery bookdealer Annie Laurance Darling. The book won't serve to lower hostilities in the continuing (and increasingly ludicrous) toughs vs. cozies war. Obnoxious editor-critic Neil Bledsoe, a sneering proponent of the hardboiled crime novel, seems determined to spoil the week for the tea-imbibing Miss Marple fans, while an unknown hand seems just as determined to end Bledsoe's life. There are at least two Christie-like least-suspected-person possibilities veteran

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buffs may anticipate, but Hart keeps the reader guessing over which of them she will choose. The fun-and-games will be a bit much for some readers, but hardcore traditionalists should ultimately embrace this book for its classical misdirection.

*** John Maddox Roberts: *The Catiline Conspiracy,* Avon, $3.50. A games-playing analogy is also applied to Roman politics in the last century B.C. in this meaty historical detective novel, the second about government functionary Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger. Even if the characters, with their names so similar, sometimes run together, the observation of Roman institutions and social mores is so well presented, it should keep the attention of most readers. I was especially interested in the background detail on Roman horse and chariot racing. The Kentucky Derby winner should be glad he doesn't face the grisly fate of the October Horse at the end of his triumphant race.

*** Katherine V. Forrest: *Murder by Tradition,* Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302; $18.95. The latest L.A. police procedural about lesbian detective Kate Delafield (closeted by professional necessity) is not a whodunit—it is known early on who was responsible for the stabbing death of gay restaurateur Teddie Crawford. The question is whether defendant Kyle Jensen will be let off the hook by a homophobic justice system—and whether Jensen's defense attorney will try to discredit Kate's testimony by exposing her lifestyle on the witness stand. An unusual novel and a totally enthralling one. If there is a better mystery series being published outside the New York mainstream, I'd like to know what it is.

*** Ellis Peters: *Flight of a Witch,* Mysterious, $16.95. It's puzzling that this 1964 novel has never before seen American publication, especially since it followed the author's Edgar-winning *Death and the Joyful Woman* by only three years. From the pre-Brother Cadfael series about police detective George Felse and his family, the tale of the vanishing and reappearance of eighteen-year-old beauty Annet Beck on a Welsh border landmark called the Hallowmount—connected in local superstition with witchcraft—is not among her best books but is marked by the same fine prose, romance, and puzzle-making that has given Peters a major reputation. (Note to Mysterious Press: will you also be giving a belated American publication to the very *first* Felse novel, *Fallen into the Pit,* published in 1951 under the author's real name, Edith Pargeter?)

** Paul Bishop: *Chapel of the Ravens,* TOR, $18.95. Earlier novels of this Los Angeles police detective have drawn comparison with Joseph Wambaugh, but this entry is more in the Dick Francis style, with soccer matches instead of steeplechases. The story of Ian Chapel, a world-class English goalie who lost an eye and now attempts a comeback for L.A.'s indoor soccer franchise (while look-

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ing into his predecessor's murder), will certainly keep you reading despite some stylistic awkwardness, stiff dialogue, and carefully spaced scenes of menace that remind you of episodic TV at worst, action pulps at best. Bishop's strongest suit are his action scenes, and the match descriptions are the highlights of the book.

Among the reprints is a bona fide classic. Apart from its considerable merits as a detective story, Cyril Hare's 1942 novel *Tragedy at Law* (HarperPerennial, $5.95) is one of the finest works of fiction about a legal system with its account of an English High Court judge traveling the Southern Circuit early in wartime. It marks the first appearance of barrister-sleuth Francis Pettigrew, who joins forces with Hare's already established Inspector Mallett.

H. R. F. Keating's *Writing Crime Fiction* (St. Martin's, $8.95), first published in 1986, is now available in paperback reprint. Few commentators know the genre as well as Inspector Ghote's creator, and his analysis of the field will interest the serious reader as much as the potential writer.

Also in trade paperback is a new edition of David Carkeet's 1980 Edgar nominee, *Double Negative* (Washington Square/Pocket, $7.95), a unique and ingenious formal puzzle set in an Indiana language study facility. Linguist Jeremy Cook later appeared in a 1990 *non*-mystery, *The Full Catastrophe*, reprinted by the same publisher at $8.95.

Challenge for mystery trivia buffs: While there are a fair number of examples of characters first appearing in non-mystery fiction who later turn detective (Ralph McInerny's Matthew Rogerson, Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, Irvin S. Cobb's Judge Priest, Clarence Budington Kelland's Scattergood Baines, Mary Roberts Rinehart's Tish, and Frances and Richard Lockridge's Mr. and Mrs. North to name a few), how many characters who debuted in detective stories returned in non-detective roles? I can think only of Harry Kemelman's rabbi-sleuth in *Conversation with Rabbi Small* (1981), and that book was a lightly fictionalized debate rather than a true novel.

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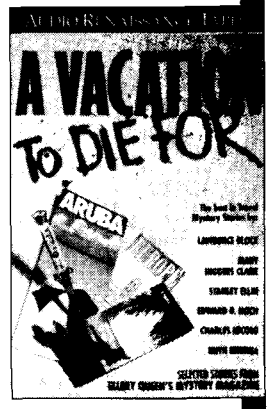
MYSTERY WHEN YOU WANT IT!



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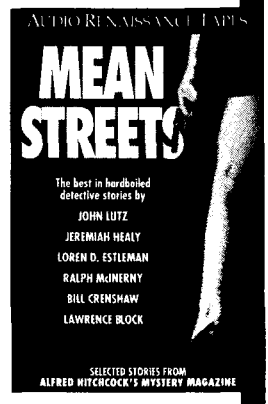

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a *NEW* short story by

ANDREW KLAVAN

Quietly, Pruskin moved to the light switch by the door. He flicked it up. The yellow light fell on the sleeping figure. The figure lay on his side, but Pruskin could make out the shock of his limp black hair, the profile of his lean, pale, hawkish face. His own face, his own young face.

Pruskin felt a warm surge of tenderness at the sight of himself. God, he thought, I look so innocent when I'm asleep.

An unusual story, a hybrid of mystery and science fiction. For some it might be reminiscent of the works of Frederic Brown and Robert A. Heinlein, but it is also a fine murder tale with several surprises lurking in the shadows.

To learn more about the author (who appears on our cover), see page 141. *But first read the story—we think that afterward you won't look at yourself in the mirror in quite the same way . . .*

SUICIDE

by ANDREW KLAVAN

Where the hell am I?

Joshua Pruskin's eyes shot open. He found himself sitting inside a plexiglass capsule. There was a shrill pulsing tone coming from somewhere. It hurt his ears.

Frantic, he peered through the capsule's clear sides. He saw what looked like a deserted storeroom. Old shelves leaning against the walls. Old equipment on the shelves: burners and clamps, broken machinery with naked wires twisting out of it.

He began to tremble. He didn't recognize this place. He didn't know how he had gotten here or what he'd been doing a moment

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before. He couldn't remember. And what was that sound, that irritating tone?

Where the hell am I?

He looked down and found the source of the noise. It was coming from a small black box in his shirt pocket. Pruskin took the box out, turned it in his hand. A red light flashed on it as the tone sounded again and again. Under the light was a button and a plastic label with the words: OFF. PRESS HERE. A wire ran from the box to the back of his neck. It seemed to be attached to his neck somehow.

Pruskin hesitated. His hand was shaking. Finally, with a convulsive movement, he jabbed the button with his finger.

On the instant, a white-hot vibration corkscrewed through him. His body went rigid. His head was thrown back. His eyes bulged. His teeth clapped together.

Then, it was over. It was over and he was looking around him wide-eyed and open-mouthed. All the breath was leaking out of him in a steady stream. He whispered:

"Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus Christ."

And he remembered the Time Machine.

It's useless. Stone had said that. Phil Stone; he remembered him, too. That bastard. Sniveling. *His* boss: Pruskin's. A shallow, grant-grubbing, glad-handing wart like that.

It's useless, Josh. You have to help us.

Yes, he remembered everything. Stone had come to him. Whining, near tears. He'd been happy enough to grab the media attention when things were going well, hadn't he? "Phil Stone's Time Machine." "Phil Stone: the man who made science fact out of science fiction." The reporters had practically swarmed around the "dynamic, youthful-looking scientist." And they ignored "his assistant." The old man with the torso shaped like a teardrop: his chest sunken, his belly big beneath his belt. The man with the pinched face and the thinning grey hair. They had no use for old Pruskin.

But when the animal experiments went wrong, Stone came crawling to him in a big hurry. *You're the real brain of the project, Joshua. I've always said so. You have to help us. The machine is useless. If a living creature sent back in time grows younger, his memory patterns will be* erased. *He won't know where he is, what he's doing. He'll go insane.*

Still sitting in the plexiglass capsule, Pruskin smiled. His hand slipped into his open windbreaker. He touched the butt of the revolver wedged in his belt.

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Well, my memory patterns are just fine, Stone old chum, he thought, remembering exactly what he had come for.

His heart beating hard, he crawled out of the capsule. He stood looking at the room a long moment. Seconds ago, its walls had been covered with control panels and computers. The Time Machine itself had stood at its center: a metal hull surrounded by a plexiglass tube; a shape like the planet Saturn.

Now the room was once again the abandoned basement place that it had been. His eyes moved over it slowly. Then they stopped.

In the far corner, there was an old showcase. A cabinet fronted by a large pane of glass. Pruskin saw it and stood stock still. A small, trembling sound escaped him.

Look at me!

He gaped at his own reflection on the surface of the glass.

He was young again. He was. His hair was black and lush again. His chest was broader. The bulge of flesh at his waist was gone. He hadn't noticed it before, but his pants and shirt were loose on him. He was slim and taut and muscular all over. He was young again. He was young.

Trying to keep his hand steady, he reached up now and worked the black box's electrode out of the base of his neck. It had all gone right. Everything had worked perfectly. He was young and yet he could still remember. He could remember his whole life.

And yet his whole life lay before him.

To avoid the security guard, he left the lab by way of the roof. He was carrying his duffel bag now. It was strapped to his back. All the same, he practically danced his way down the fire stairs. And when he reached the ground, he struck off swiftly into the night.

What a walk that was! Through the dark, under the clustered trees of the quiet campus. Up the hill toward the apartments on the north side. With every step, he felt the force of his new energy—or his *old* energy, really, his old health. And his old *painlessness*. He hadn't appreciated that when he was young, when he was young before. No dull burning in his lower back. No achy gurgle in his stomach. None of that constant niggling in his bladder. He appreciated it now. He loved it now.

Pruskin laughed out loud as he strode up the hill. He wasn't even out of breath. He drew in the honeysuckle and the California autumn with deep, deep lungs.

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This place, he thought. This very place. He had been a graduate student here. A brilliant young man. The most expansive scientific mind since Einstein, one of his professors had said. And no less a physicist than Chaim Mendohlson—Chaim Mendohlson himself—had been his mentor.

He reached the top of the hill. He paused there. He turned and looked behind him at the night trees, the still campus. This place, he thought, this was where I was before. Before his friends turned away from him, before the scientific establishment rejected him. Before the women. Yes, especially the women. Before all those women ruined him.

Even now, his stomach went sour at the thought of them. Betsy Farmer, who had seduced him away from his mentor. Julia, his first wife, whose affairs with his colleagues made him a laughing stock. And his second wife. And his third; Christ, his third.

He shuddered. He turned away again. It didn't matter now, he told himself. It wasn't going to matter any more, ever again.

He walked on. Left the campus. Hurried up Eucalyptus Avenue, taking in the sights. There was the old Pizza Garden where he'd held court with admiring friends. And the arty movie theater—*The Seventh Seal* every two months. And the all-night donut shop: he breathed in the smell of it, he remembered the smell of it. He remembered all of it. His body remembered it all.

He went on, up to the corner of Eucalyptus and Ash. There was a house here. Charming; a brick front covered with ivory. A white portico with two broad casement windows opening out above its pediment.

Pruskin stood on the sidewalk, looking up at it. Those windows led into the second-story apartment; he remembered that, too.

Once more, he reached under his jacket, patted the gun in his belt.

This was it. He had reached his destination.

He'd been locked out of this building once. It was at the height of his passion for Betsy Farmer. He'd come home from a date at four in the morning to find his respectable landlady had bolted the door. Young Pruskin had had to shimmy up the portico's columns and swing himself into his room through the open casements. As he remembered it, it hadn't been all that hard to do.

So he did it now. Clipping himself to the pillar with knees and elbows, jerking upward like an inchworm in the night. Hell of a way

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for an old man to behave, he thought. But even with the weight of the duffel bag strapped to his back, he was soon scrabbling over the pediment, grabbing for the window's ledge. A moment more, and he slid noiselessly into the darkened apartment.

As soon as he entered, it was as if he had been here yesterday. In spite of the dark, he knew—his senses knew—the boxy rectangle of the tiny studio. The Hollywood bed pushed against one wall. The record player and its stack of 45s: "Travelin' Man," "Runaway," "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" In one corner of the floor there was the portable TV on which he'd watched news of the Cuban missile crisis. In another corner was a small table with textbooks and papers scattered on it everywhere. Yes, he knew it. It was good to be in the old place again.

His eyes began to adjust. He turned in the direction of the Hollywood bed. Now he could see the figure, lying still, breathing evenly, under the covers.

Quietly, Pruskin moved to the light switch by the door. He flicked it up. The yellow light fell on the sleeping figure. The figure lay on his side, but Pruskin could make out the shock of his limp black hair, the profile of his lean, pale, hawkish face. His own face, his own young face.

Pruskin felt a warm surge of tenderness at the sight of himself. God, he thought, I look so innocent when I'm asleep.

For a moment, he didn't know if he'd be able to go through with it. His legs felt weak. His mouth felt dry. He slid the duffel bag off his back and let it down to the floor. Walking unsteadily, he came forward. He sank down and sat on the edge of the bed.

No. There was no turning back. He knew that. The Time Machine had been left behind. The choices were already made. He had to steel himself. He had to think of all the terrible things that would happen if he didn't go through with it. The foolish career decisions his young self would make, the bad investments, the treacherous advisors. And those women. Those women: they would destroy him—all the hopes, all the promise that he saw lying there. He had to do what he had come for.

He breathed in deeply. He felt his pity—his pity for himself—dissipating like mist. His lips pressed together tightly. He reached forward to take the pillow from beneath his own sleeping head.

But before he reached it, the other—his young self—made a noise. He began to open his eyes.

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Pruskin froze, his hand extended. Now, he told himself, you have to do it now!

But he couldn't. He just sat there, hung there above his young self, staring down at him, fascinated.

His young self blinked sleepily. He turned his head on the pillow. He saw Pruskin, this other Pruskin who had come, sitting over him.

"What?" he said. He returned the intruder's stare. He shook his head. He said again, "What?" Wide awake now, he sat up quickly. He kept shaking his head. His back was pressed against the wall.

And still Pruskin the time traveler remained motionless, his hand half extended.

"What's happening?" Pruskin's young self looked at him wildly, looked wildly around the room, at the wall, at the door, back to him, himself, this living reflection of himself. He clutched his head as if to hold it together. "What the hell is happening here?" He covered his face. Rubbed his eyes with both hands.

Pruskin couldn't help it. He let out a short laugh. "It's not a dream," he said. "It's yourself you're looking at."

"What's happening?" the other said yet again. "I don't understand this. I don't— Oh, God!" He held his hands over his mouth. His eyes were the eyes of a cornered animal. "What *is* it?" he hissed frantically. "What's going *on*?"

Pruskin smiled gently now. "It's time," he said. "In the future, you can travel in time."

But his young self only stared and shook his head.

Pruskin tried again. "Use your brain," he said. "You're already working on the principles. Hough's tunnel, atomization. It all becomes real. It all works. You're the first person to actually do it."

Now, finally, it started to get through. Pruskin could see the realization rising in those terrified eyes. His young self straightened on the bed. "Time?" he whispered.

"I've come from your future. I *am* your future. Or I was, anyway."

His young self wiped his mouth with his hand. "You're—?"

"That's right. Now you're getting it."

"But that's— But you can't— I mean, you're—*young*. You're my age. You're—you're *me!*"

"Yes, that surprised us, too. Turns out a living body traveling back in time grows younger. Light speed makes no difference."

Suddenly, young Joshua let out a laugh just like the one Pruskin had let out a moment ago. He shook his head again, in wonder now. And then: "But what about your memory?"

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Pruskin was pleased. I always was a quick study, he thought. "Well, of course that was a problem. I had to create a kind of recorder: a computer that memorizes the synaptic patterns of the brain, then uses a series of electrical signals to reconstruct them when you reach your destination."

"Oh, that's great. That's brilliant."

"A lot smarter than Phil Stone, anyway." Pruskin chuckled an old man's chuckle. "I didn't even tell him about it. He's probably still scratching his head, wondering who stole the goddamned capsule."

"Phil Stone? Cripes, we're not working with that ass."

Pruskin shrugged. "He got the funding."

"*He* got the funding? But he's an idiot! He's second rate—third rate."

"Yes. And he still is. But he knows how to handle himself, you see. That's the thing. He knows how to get grants, how to make friends and which friends to make. What I mean is: he knows all the things that you don't. He gets ahead, while you make mistakes. A lot of mistakes. That's why I came back."

Pruskin paused a moment to let his young self take this in. He watched tenderly as that familiar young face slowly began to glow with understanding.

"I get it," the youth said softly. "You know what's going to happen. To me. To us. You know what happens in my future."

Pruskin nodded. "That's it."

"And you can show me what to do. You can tell me what to look out for, where the pitfalls are." He was sitting rigid now with excitement.

But the elder Pruskin sighed. "Unfortunately," he said, "experience is not something you can just tell."

"Well, yes, but you can alert me to trouble spots. You can—"

"No." Pruskin shook his head sadly. "That's the point: experience changes you. Each mistake changes you into the sort of person who won't make that mistake again. I'm not the man I was, you see; I'm not the man you are. I'm now finally the sort of person we need—that you and I need—in order to live our life the way we should. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Well—no," his young self answered. "I mean, how can we do that unless you take over my—" He stopped short.

Yes, Pruskin thought sadly, I was a quick study even then.

"But what about—what about me?" said his young self. His poor young self. And even as he spoke the words, Pruskin could see that he understood.

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"I'm sorry," Pruskin told him.

"No."

"Try to understand—"

"You can't be serious."

"You want a good life, don't you? You don't want to be poor and obscure while other men, lesser men, win all the honors."

"But—" The youth was pressed up hard against the wall now, as if he were trying to get away. "But, I mean, it wouldn't be me then. It wouldn't be *my* life any more."

"Oh, it'll still be you," Pruskin said soothingly. "It'll just be the later you. The better you. The you that you've become."

His young self was shaking his head again, but Pruskin was ready now. He was growing excited, in fact—breathless. He was eager to get started on his new existence.

"Please," said his young self, "you can't do this to me. To yourself. Please."

Pruskin made a face. He didn't like to hear himself whimper. He reached inside his jacket.

But all of a sudden, his young self threw the bedcovers aside. Pruskin whipped out his pistol. His young self froze. "Please," he whimpered again.

"Just relax," Pruskin told him. But he could hardly speak himself, his heart was pounding so hard. "You can't die if I'm alive. We're the same person. As long as I'm alive, we're—"

"Oh, God!" His young self tried to break from the bed, but Pruskin was too fast for him. He snapped the gun barrel across his forehead, knocking him to the floor. Now he grabbed the pillow and was on top of himself in an instant. He pinned his arms with his knees. He pressed the pillow over his face. He felt himself struggling under him, his body twisting and heaving. Pruskin's breath squeezed out of his throat in hoarse rasps as he pressed the pillow down hard, as he felt his old life darkening—darkening, and dawning again inside himself with a rich, bright, mushrooming warmth.

And then it was over. His young self lay still.

His eyes closed, Pruskin leaned over him, pressing the pillow down, rocking gently back and forth.

He buried himself in the Thunder Cave, by a lover's lane in the mountains. The cave was a dirt-floored crevice rent by earthquakes in the mountain rock. Tremors caused frequent cave-ins there,

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which kept explorers and spelunkers away. He didn't think the grave would be uncovered anytime soon.

But the work itself was nervous work. He had to wrap his body in the tarp he'd brought, carry it outside to the parking lot, dump it in the trunk of his old Chevy, and grit his teeth as the jalopy sputtered and chugged its way up the mountain road.

He parked at the base of the lover's lane, then carried his duffel bag down the slope to the cave entrance and returned to the car and got the body. Hoisting it over his shoulder, he started up the path. The weight of it—the weight of his own corpse—made him queasy. The feel of it flopping against his back. He kept looking around, afraid he was being followed.

No one can suspect you, you old fool, he told himself. For Christ's sake: the victim is still alive.

He reached the cleft rock. He lowered the body and the duffel bag into it, then climbed down himself.

By the dim beam of a flashlight, he worked his way deep into the rocks. When he felt he was in far enough, he set down his burden. He got his tools out of the duffel bag and began to dig.

The pick and shovel sounded loud to him in the stony earth. He stopped his work every few minutes. He listened to the night, to the corners of the cave. No one was there. No one could hear. No one could suspect him.

The work went slowly. It was two hours before the hole was deep enough.

Finally, he unrolled the tarp and dumped his body into the grave. In the dim glow of the flash, he saw his own eyes staring up at him out of his own youthful face. It made him feel sad now to see himself limp and lifeless in the dark earth like that.

He tossed his gun in beside the body, then filled the hole in as quickly as he could.

One evening in November, Pruskin sat alone in the northside Pizza Garden. He was eating a slice, drinking a beer. Reading a paper on "Entropy and the Direction of Time." Feeling very good, very satisfied with himself indeed.

It had taken him a few weeks to get adjusted. After all, while he knew his future quite well, his present had become only a dim memory. He had had to remember so many little things: what classes he was taking, where he kept his checkbook, not to mention the names of all the people he was supposed to know.

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But then, he was known to be absent-minded—he could get away with a gaffe here and there. And the advantages of his situation far outweighed the inconveniences. With thirty new years of science in his head, he was far more brilliant now than the first time he'd been in school. He knew which professors to cultivate and which to ignore. And, perhaps most importantly, he knew which people he had to avoid.

He was just smiling at these thoughts when he looked up from his journal and saw her. She had sat down across from him. Just the way he remembered her: her small smile glistening, her eyes deep and green.

"Aren't you Joshua Pruskin?" she said.

And for a moment, Pruskin couldn't answer her. His eyes moved slowly down over her brown hair, her slender neck, the swell of her peach blouse, the down on her bare arms. Yes, he thought, a little breathlessly, and you're Betsy Farmer. The coed in Elementary Particles.

But out loud he only said, "Yeah, that's me."

"I'm Betsy Farmer," she said. "The coed in Elementary Particles? I really admired the paper you wrote on the strong force."

God, thought Pruskin. She's so young. To make love to a girl that young, that soft again—

He started to smile into those cool eyes. And then he stopped. He remembered: the Sanderson project. She had sought him out; she had slept with him. And then she had begged him to enlist in the Sanderson project. He had gone along, enthralled to her, even though he knew Professor Sanderson was Chaim Mendohlson's arch rival. And after his relationship with his powerful mentor was ruined, the project failed miserably—and Betsy abandoned him so she'd be free to conduct her affair with Sanderson out in the open.

Pruskin slapped his book shut. He showed the coed a wintry smile. "Excuse me, Miss Farmer," was all he said. And he pushed his chair out and stood.

As he left the Garden, he glanced back at her. She was just sitting there, staring. Her mouth was actually hanging open. Pruskin laughed as he stepped out onto the sidewalk. He continued chuckling all the way back to his apartment.

But that night he lay awake on the Hollywood bed. He lay with his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. She was so young, he thought. The skin of her arms was so smooth, so pink. To feel such fresh skin against his own again. To drink it in with all

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the energy of youth, the experience of age, and the yearning, the yearning of so many years.

He wanted a woman. He wanted the privilege of his new youth: a young woman. But the very thought of it made his heart clutch with fear. He would have to be so careful this time. It couldn't be like before. He would have to keep away from those smart, crafty, calculating bitches. He would have to choose his target. He would have to stay in control.

But no matter what else, he realized, one way or another, he was going to have to have a woman.

A few days later, he found one. He was sitting in the student union between classes. He was in an armchair. He had a textbook open on his lap, but his eyes were moving over the other students. He watched them: sitting on the tattered furniture, standing by the broad picture windows, even lounging on the worn rug, reading, talking, sipping sodas, munching chips. Pruskin studied them for a long time. And then one of them looked back at him.

She was a shapely blonde in a pleated skirt and a crisp white blouse. She had her hair in a high ponytail. She had a sweater draped over her shoulders. She blushed when he returned her glance—lowered her eyes and swiveled away.

Pruskin remembered women like that. Her youth—the shy youth in her eyes, the young shape of her—made him nervous, almost as nervous as he would have been the first time he was young himself. But this wasn't the first time. He stood up and walked over to her.

Her name was Cathy. She told him she was majoring in English. I'm in! Pruskin thought. He asked her out to dinner.

He took her to The Haven, a lobster place out by the water. They sat by the window and drank white wine while a full moon rose over the darkening waves.

"I don't know," Cathy said to him. "I mean, I want to get married and have kids and all that. But sometimes I think, you know, I could do other things, too. For a while at least, anyway. I mean, I don't want to be one of those girls who just comes to college to meet guys. Not that I don't want to meet guys, you know, but—I don't know, do you see what I'm saying?"

Pruskin nodded sympathetically. He had often thought that given another chance he would treat women differently than he had in his youth. He would control his ego and hold his tongue a little. He

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would listen to them more. He thought it was by far the surest way to get them to put out.

"I understand," he said.

And Cathy smiled gratefully.

By the time they had their coffee, she was leaning across the table toward him. When they left the restaurant, she let him take hold of her hand. They walked together across the parking lot to his Chevy. When they reached it, he took her by the shoulders. Cathy tilted her head back, closed her eyes. He kissed her.

"This has been wonderful," he told her softly. "I don't want it to end."

She looked at him, let her eyes play over his face. Then she lifted them to the sky. The big moon now hung ripe and orange above the Pacific.

"It's a beautiful night," she whispered. "Let's drive up to the Thunder Cave."

The words made Pruskin shudder. It was a natural thing for her to say, of course. That was where the students went in those days—to "neck," as they called it. Still, it was only six weeks since he'd buried his body in that cave. He could still see those blank eyes, his own eyes, gazing up at him sadly as he shoveled the dirt on top of them.

But he wasn't about to risk losing this moment. He let her into the car and they drove up to the mountain.

It was Friday night. There were plenty of others parked on the lane up there. Pruskin had to drive down close to the cave before he found a spot for the Chevy. There, he and Cathy sat together silently for a while. They looked out through the windshield at the lights of the town below. Pruskin put his arm around the girl. She slid close to him. She lay her head on his shoulder. The scent of her hair, the heat of her scent, went through him like whiskey. Cathy raised her face to him. He kissed her until his mind swam. Those lips, those soft cheeks, the firmness of her breasts when he put his hand on them: only a man his age could truly appreciate it.

He glanced over her shoulder a moment. In the distance, in the moonlight, he could just make out the shadow of the rockfall where the cave was. He felt the gaze of those sad, those buried eyes of his. Oh, you would have ruined everything, he thought. You would have been destroyed by Betsy Farmer, ruined your whole career. Stop complaining. He lowered his lips to Cathy's neck.

"Mm," she said after a while. "I really do love it here."

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"It is nice," said Pruskin. He was holding her in his lap now, stroking the inside of her leg gently.

She stretched in his arms. "I'm going to come up here again on Sunday," she said.

"Are you? Not with someone else, I hope."

"No, you goof." She laughed. "No. Me and some of my friends are coming up. We're going to explore the cave."

"What?" Pruskin's breath caught. His stomach went cold. "You can't do that," he said.

Cathy laughed again. "Sure, I can. Why not?"

"Um—well, isn't it dangerous?"

"Yeah, that's kind of the point. No one's been down there in over ten years."

He tried to speak again, but couldn't think of anything to say. He couldn't think at all. And he had to. He had to think.

"Uh—look, Cathy." He lifted her up quickly and set her back in the seat beside him.

Her lips parted in surprise. "Joshua, what—?"

"I've got a—test. I have an important test tomorrow and I really have to study for it." He started the car engine. He had to get rid of her. He had to think. He had to figure out what to do.

"But tomorrow's Saturday," Cathy said.

"Is it? Yes, well, they work you hard here, don't they?"

He pulled out of the lane. Cathy gave a great huff and slid away from him, her shoulder against the far door. He drove down the mountain quickly, bumping over the dirt. Cathy crossed her arms over her chest. She pressed her lips together, not speaking until the car stopped before her dormitory. Then she flung herself out of the car. "Thanks a lot!" she said. And the door slammed shut behind her.

The Chevy's tires screeched as Pruskin pulled away from the curb.

He paced the floor of his room into the night. He worked over the possibilities.

Maybe they won't find it, he thought. But he knew they would. Maybe I should kill her, too. Draw her out into the woods and— But he knew he couldn't. And what about her friends? Was he supposed to kill all of them?

No, there was only one answer. It ate its way out of him, the worm in the apple. He paced from the shelves to the bed and back again, and it chewed and screwed and slid relentlessly to the surface of his

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consciousness. By three-thirty that morning, he could no longer avoid the conclusion.

He was going to have to move the body.

He waited a day: a damp, sickly day. He lay in bed, clammy, shivering, watching the shadows ride across the ceiling. Even when night fell, he stayed where he was, lying on his back, the sweat running down his temples, dampening his pillow. All that night he waited. Saturday night. He knew the last lovers wouldn't leave the lane until morning.

At two A.M., he went. He drove up the mountain. He parked on the empty lane and walked down to the cave in the dark.

With his duffel on his back, he worked his way into the rock. In a few minutes, he was there again, standing at his own grave. In the glow of his flashlight, he could see the ruffled earth. There was no question but that Cathy and her group would find it. With a sigh, he set the duffel bag down. He took out his pick and shovel and set to work.

The earth was harder than before, but it hadn't frozen. The pick worked through it easily. The shovel cleared it away. Pruskin dug quickly, without thinking. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to think about what he was going to find.

But at last he did find it. The point of his shovel sank into something thicker than the earth, and softer. Pruskin's gorge rose. He forced it down. He dug more carefully. A new smell wafted up to him, a dense gas that forced its way into his throat. Pruskin gagged, but he kept on digging. Slowly, the body was uncovered. The legs first. Then the torso. He squinted, trying not to see.

And then he cleared a shovelful of dirt and saw: the face.

It was still his face, his own face. His own face with the skin stretched so tight that it pulled the jaws apart. A grey beetle, startled, clambered out of his open mouth. Pruskin choked and turned away. He pulled the tarp out of his duffel bag and dropped it over that decaying reflection.

And as he did, the cave's shadows were blown apart by a burning white flash. Pruskin reeled back, blinded. The light bore down on him. He raised his arms to shield his eyes.

And a voice shook the cave like a quake, like thunder: "Stand back! Stand away from the grave! Put your hands in the air!"

Pruskin peered over his raised arms. A figure stepped toward him out of the light. "Put them up," it said again.

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And he saw her. It was Cathy. She was holding something in front of him. It was her wallet. It was her badge.

"Cathy Norris," she said. "DA's office. You're under arrest."

Behind her, the man with the spotlight and the mini-camera continued to film the scene.

Before Pruskin could say anything, he was grabbed from behind. Powerful hands wrestled his arms around his back. Rings of cold metal snapped shut over his wrists.

He was brought roughly out of the cave, pulled from above, pushed from below. Young men with stern faces closed in around him. He stood with his hands cuffed, his head bowed, his mind spinning. He jumped as the red light of a police car came flashing up the lane.

A moment later, Cathy climbed out of the cave. Another figure stepped out of the dark and stood beside her. It was another woman. No, it *wasn't.* Pruskin stared stupidly. It was not another woman, it was the same woman: it was Cathy, too.

The first Cathy and the second Cathy smiled at each other.

"Thanks for letting me watch," the second Cathy said. "It was really, really neat."

"Well, I shouldn't have," said the first Cathy. "But I know how much you always worried about your future."

"Yeah," said the second Cathy. "But working in the DA's office: that's just really, really neat." She sighed. "So how's my love life?"

The first Cathy laughed, patted the other's shoulder. "Hang around, kid," she said. "You'll find out soon enough."

With that, she left the other one behind and approached Pruskin.

Pruskin's mouth opened and closed. "You're from then," he managed to say finally. "You're old. You're from then."

"Fifty-four is not exactly *old!* I mean, jeeze."

"How did you find me?"

"Someone finally stumbled on the body," Cathy said. "It was quite a mystery, too: a 1960s skeleton buried in the cave with a 1990s gun lying beside it. Nobody thought the two things could be connected at first. But when I did finally think about it, I naturally thought about you. After all, where I come from, you're a very famous man. Inventor of the Time Machine. Winner of the Nobel Prize. One of the most impressive careers in modern science and all that. Still, it took me a while to figure it out exactly. Then I checked your dental records. They matched the skeleton's teeth—if you left out all the work done after the Sixties. When I saw that, I suspected what'd happened. The only problem was how to prove it."

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She took hold of one of his elbows. A man approached and took hold of the other. They started to lead him up the slope, toward the lane where the police car had parked.

Pruskin's jaw was slack. He still couldn't quite comprehend it. "Was it always you, then? Even in the student union?"

"Sorry," Cathy said. "It was me right along. If I'd known the exact time of death, I would've come back to witness the murder itself. As it was, I had to get you up here, get you to tip your hand, before I could be sure, before I could make my move."

They reached the police car. A man, faceless in the night shadows, pulled the back door open. Cathy guided her prisoner down onto the seat. Pruskin looked up at her and sneered.

"Every female I've ever known has betrayed me," he said.

Cathy shrugged. "Whose fault is that? You pick 'em. The way I look at it, you must be self-destructive."

And then she laughed—and then she shut the door.

ON OUR COVER

Andrew Klavan—writing under the name Keith Peterson—is the award-winning author of five novels. *The Trapdoor,* the first in his John Wells series, was nominated for an Edgar Award in 1988 for Best Paperback Original. His third novel, *The Rain,* won the award the next year. Klavan adapted Simon Brett's *Shock to the System* for the 1989 film starring Micheal Caine, and is currently working on screenplays for two of his own novels, *The Scarred Man* and his most recent nail-biter, *Don't Say A Word* (Pocketbooks Hardcover).

Klavan, a former newspaper and radio reporter, is a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. He lives in Manhattan with his wife, Ellen, and his daughter Faith. They are all expecting a new child in November.

Appearing on the cover with the author is our Managing Editor, Russell Atwood. Russ was born in Westfield, Mass. and educated (some say) at The American University in Washington, D.C. He's worked for EQMM since moving to New York City three years ago and currently moonlights as one of the house managers at the newly renovated Westside Theatre, home of the hit off-Broadway musical revue, *And the World Goes 'Round.*

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GRAHAM GREENE

At the door the man said goodbye to her. She said, "We haven't spoken at all of Education Sentimentale. *If you could manage another meeting—"*

"I'll certainly do my best," he said. "It has been a great pleasure meeting you." When she had left, he turned away toward the lavatory, still carrying his cigarette.

An original story from the recent Graham Greene collection, The Last Word and Other Stories, *published by Reinhardt Books in association with Viking . . .*

A BRANCH OF THE SERVICE

by GRAHAM GREENE

I have been forced reluctantly to retire from a profession which I found of great interest and on a few occasions even dangerous because I have lost my appetite for food. Nowadays I can eat only in order to drink a little—before my meal a glass or two of vodka, and then a half bottle of wine: I find it quite impossible to face a menu, leave alone the heavy three- or even four-course meals in restaurants which my profession demanded.

I owed it to my father that I got the job I am now leaving, though he died before I was, as we call it, recruited. My earliest memories are the smells of a kitchen—they are happy memories even though I now find it a burden to eat. The kitchen was not one in my home: it was, as it were, an abstract kitchen which represented all the kitchens in which my father cooked—kitchens in England, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and once I believe for a short while in Russia. He was a great chef—but he was never officially recognized. He

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moved from country to country. He was never out of a job, but he never kept a job long because he always knew better than his employer when it was time for him to leave.

Of my mother I remember nothing—I think she must always have been left behind on our travels. How I enjoyed eating in those days, yet I never learnt how to cook. That was my father's pride and secret. What I learnt were languages—never very well but a smattering of many. I could understand better than I spoke. The man who later recruited me understood that. I remember him saying, "To understand is the only important thing. We don't want you to talk."

You may wonder why it was necessary for me to eat large meals in order to keep my job. Even in a good restaurant one does not feel bound to eat more than two courses and one may always linger a long time over the wine. Yes, but I was supposed to be judging the food not the wine, even awarding stars to the food in the fashion of Michelin, but of course stars differently designed. I even had to inspect the lavatories.

In my father's eyes I would never have made a first-class cook, and he didn't wish me to spend my life as a kitchen help. Through an admirer of his English cooking in a little restaurant in St. Albans where he worked for a year before quarreling with his employer, he introduced me to a new organization which called itself International Reliable Restaurants Association, but before I had finished my first six months' training they changed the name. IRRA was a little putting off because of the Irish difficulties, and so they became instead the International Guide to Good Restaurants, or the IGGR.

Their advertisements and their reputation rose together—at any rate for English customers, for they soon outbid Michelin. Michelin was too nationalist. Michelin awarded to Paris in those days five stars to eight restaurants, while to London they gave no five stars and only two four stars. The IGGR was far more generous, and that proved an advantage.

I had been an inspector for the IGGR for two years before I was recruited for special duties.

As I learnt during my training in these so-called duties, we were not really interested in the number of stars or even in the cleanness of the lavatories. The people with whom we were concerned were unlikely to be found in very expensive restaurants, for costly eating can make the eater conspicuous.

"Rich eaters are not the main interest of this section," my instructor told me, "here we look out for an ordinary customer. Especially

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those who are more than usually ordinary—they are the likely ones."

I found his lessons at first a little obscure, until he told me a story which explained one of my puzzling memories of Paris. He said, "Of course, in this section we are not concerned with police work, but all the same we have taken a hint from the French police. Do you remember the lottery sellers who used to come into the bistros and the small restaurants in France?"

"Yes. You never see them now."

"And yet lottery selling is not illegal. They are gone because they had outlived their usefulness."

"What was their usefulness?"

"The police showed them the photographs of wanted men—small fry, thieves, and the like—and they would go from table to table looking at the faces. This gave us an idea for a rather more important work, a work which involves our ears more than our eyes."

He made a long pause; he meant, I think, to arouse our curiosity, and curious we certainly were at having been taken away from tasting food and inspecting lavatories. But we were wrong. There was a gleam of amusement in our speaker's eyes. "The lavatories are of particular importance," he said.

"From the point of view of cleanness, of course?" a novice (not me) asked.

I still had no idea what our instructor was talking about. "No, no," he said. "Cleanness isn't our concern, but the lavatory is a private place if you want to exchange a word or a packet with a friend. Unless, of course, your friend is a woman, but we'll come to that possibility later."

A lot of other possibilities came later.

"There are phrases in conversation that you hear in a restaurant which are worth attention. *Pas de problème* is less interesting in France where it is in such common use, but if one of your neighbors in a small unfashionable restaurant in Manchester (a restaurant which hasn't got even one star) says, 'There's no problem,' it's worth paying attention."

I think that he felt among the novices a certain skepticism. He went on, "A hundred chances to one, of course, nothing of interest—of obvious interest—will follow—but make a note. There remains the one chance. The lavatory, too—though perhaps the chances there are a little greater. For example, two men peeing beside each other and talking. Our organization fills a gap—an im-

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portant gap in security. A house is watched—but that again is not our job. The telephone is tapped. Not our job. Even street meetings are in other hands. But restaurants—we are doing a great service to the state."

A question came to my mind. "But when once we have given a star to a restaurant we have no excuse to go on eating there?"

"You are wrong. Two stars might be gained for the next edition—or a star could be lost. A certain blackmail is sometimes necessary. You will always be welcome and given the best food."

The best food—yes, that was my problem. A career of eating. Of course, it didn't worry me at the beginning, and what attracted me was not so much being of service to the state as the hint of mystery about the whole affair. The phrase "no problem" stayed like a tune in my ears.

Of course, when first sent on duty one made serious mistakes, but unlike other professions one was excused—even sometimes praised—for a mistake because it might have added a little to one's experience.

My first bad mistake—which in any other profession would have ruined my career—happened to be concerned with a lavatory. But I would prefer to speak of my first lucky success, which far outweighed my lavatory error, although that success, too, concerned a lavatory. The occasion took place in a three-starred restaurant, a smart one, but not too smart, like the Ritz. In my first three years, I was only told to take a watch in the Ritz once—the expense was too great and the chances too small. Waiters there were apt to notice strangers. I had been shown a photograph, but a very bad one, of a suspect who apparently had been seen at this restaurant more than once and was believed to be a foreigner. In his case, they had already paid three experienced watchers—one a day—and they were almost ready to give up. His companion at table was always different.

Quite by chance—in our profession nearly everything is a chance—I happened to be sitting at the next table to a solitary man. Some instinct had made me choose the table next to him for I could see little resemblance to photographs I had been shown. However, there was a foreign look about him, and perhaps (I might have imagined it) a look of impatience or anxiety, and his table was laid for two. He had ordered a glass of port (not a usual aperitif for an Englishman) and he lingered over it. I lingered, too, over my very dry Martini, trying to outlinger him.

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At last the friend he was awaiting arrived—a woman. I write "friend," but the greeting which he gave her struck me as very odd—"Pleased to meet you," that very antiquated English phrase, was spoken in a distinctly foreign accent.

For the rest of my meal, there could no longer be any malingering. In my training I had been taught that I must always finish my meal and pay my bill while those whom I had chosen to watch were still eating. Of course, I could spend quite a lot of time, after paying, with a coffee, but I must be prepared to leave my table a little before those I watched or a very little after. I had to keep in touch, at all costs, but avoid the suspicion of keeping them under observation.

This early experience of mine in the Royalty restaurant was a physically very painful one, for the pair whom I had chosen to watch had a large meal and I have always, as I have said, had a very small appetite. First they chose a mixed salad, then roast beef, then cheese, and then, to my horror, they ordered a dessert—this, too, was a foreign touch, for in England we finish with cheese. It confirmed for me that the two were of different nationalities and that "pleased to meet you" had been an agreed signal. A momentary disagreement over cheese before dessert confirmed me in thinking that the man was French and the woman English.

Their conversation was mainly on the subject of Flaubert, about whom the woman was writing a book. Of course it occurred to me that Flaubert might be the pseudonym of a third agent and Madame Bovary of yet another. They made no attempt to lower their voices.

"It's very good of you to see me," the woman told him. "I have used your great work on Flaubert a good deal and it's very kind of you to allow me to quote from it."

I knew little of Flaubert's life, but I began to learn quite a lot, and there really seemed nothing wrong with the couple.

"I'd have liked to see you once again and show you my text before it goes to the publisher, but I know how busy you are," the woman said.

"Yes, I would like to see it, but I'm afraid I'm off by an early plane tomorrow. At nine-thirty."

I made a mental note to check the time and destination, but I had really lost all suspicion and I would have called it a wasted day if it had not been for the cigarettes. After the meat course, when they were waiting for the cheese trolley, she offered him a cigarette.

He hesitated, and I thought he glanced at me.

"A Benson and Hedges Extra Mild," she told him.

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"Yes, I do like one of those, but do you mind—I only smoke one after I have finished eating. It's a habit." However, she took a cigarette and laid it by his plate.

"You don't mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"Of course not."

He lit her cigarette and the cheese trolley arrived. She chose a Stilton and he chose a Brie. I chose the smallest bit of Gruyere that I could persuade the waiter to cut and shuddered at the thought of the dessert which was yet to come. I took an ice, and after the apple tarts which they picked the woman took a coffee. I did the same. He seemed to have forgotten her cigarette, for he left it still unlit beside his plate. Perhaps a Benson and Hedges, I thought, was too mild for his taste. They continued to talk about Flaubert, but what they said was quite beyond me. At last the man asked for his bill and I quickly did the same, but theirs came first and I had no time to wait for it before I followed them from the restaurant. The man still carried his cigarette. Perhaps he had no intention of smoking it but didn't wish to offend his companion by throwing it away.

At the door he said goodbye to her. She said, "We haven't spoken at all of *Education Sentimentale*. If you could manage another meeting—"

"I'll certainly do my best," he said. "It has been a great pleasure meeting you." When she had left, he turned away toward the lavatory, still carrying his cigarette. A tidy man, I thought, he's going to throw it into the toilet. But all the same a reasonless curiosity had settled in my brain. There was another reason, too. I wanted to practice my new profession. A good cook progresses through his errors. A short pause and then I followed him, walking as quietly as I could.

He was washing his hands when I entered and he had laid the cigarette to one side out of the way of the water—that eternal unsmoked cigarette. I snatched it, and before he had time to turn I was out of the lavatory. There was no shout from behind me—only the sound of pursuing feet. At the hotel entrance, I pushed the porter to one side and ran into the street. Luck was with me. A taxi had just deposited a customer. As I drove away, I saw the customer rushing after me into the street, followed by the waiter, who was waving my unpaid bill. Poor man. I paid it later indirectly with interest by recommending the restaurant for a fourth star, which it certainly did not deserve.

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In the taxi, I looked more closely at the cigarette. There was an odd feeling in the center—a kind of hardening of the tobacco, and at one end a kind of roughening in the packing of the cigarette. I was careful not to finger it more. It had already passed through three hands and was a little damp from its lavatory lodging—there seemed reason enough for all this. All the same, I had learnt in my training to hand over any object however trivial belonging to a suspect, and this I did as soon as I reached the office of the International Guide to Good Restaurants. Then I sat down to write my report, and my instinct made me enclose with it the untidy cigarette.

I hadn't given in my report long when the telephone sounded. "Scramble," my chief's voice said, and I touched the button which would make our conversation unintelligible to anyone who might be tapping our line.

"The woman I feel pretty sure was English and the man French, I think, but they spoke to each other in English although they were both experts on Flaubert."

"I think they wanted you to listen. They were proving, you might say, their innocence."

"But are they guilty?"

"Guilty as hell. You've done a first-rate job. Come along in an hour and see me."

When I went to him, the cigarette lay torn in half on his desk in a small litter of flakes. "Benson and Hedges Special Mild," he said with a smile of satisfaction. "Low in tar content, but certainly not low in valuable information." He showed a little bit of wrinkled paper. "A good way to conceal it," he said, "in the middle of a cigarette."

"What's on it?" I asked.

"We'll soon know. Microdots and a code, of course. You've done a good job. It was very acute of you to take the cigarette."

Such a good job indeed that they forgave me several months later for a very bad mistake which also involved a lavatory.

The cigarette had led us to a new suspect for our file, a doctor who had connections with the chemical industry. He was now placed under continuous surveillance; a whole team of us was employed night and day. His open practice was in a small country town not far from the factory which used him as a consultant when one of the employees went sick.

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He had been very thoroughly vetted by MI5, but our relations were closer to MI6 and there was a good deal of rivalry and even jealousy between the two establishments. The foundation of the international food guide was regarded by MI5 as an intrusion into their territory, and it was true that we had not passed onto them the information contained in the cigarette. Counter-espionage abroad certainly belonged to MI6, but our food guide was international and it would be inefficient to split the English section from the foreign. No watcher was employed more than once in two weeks and always at different mealtimes in order that the suspect would never become aware of a familiar face. Unfortunately for me, the doctor was a man of inordinate appetite, and after two months my turn came at the hour of dinner—the hour when his appetite was greatest. Unfortunately, too, I had suffered from a succession of heavy meals earlier. To award a star even to breakfasts had to be considered, and it was extraordinary how many people still preserved a pre-war appetite for what is still called an English breakfast as distinct from a continental one—eggs and bacon, or, even worse, sausages and bacon, sometimes even preceded by a helping of haddock.

I took over from his watcher outside a quite simple inn which was called the Star and Garter only half a mile from his own house. We were the only diners and I sat down at a table well away from his. I noticed he looked quite often at his watch, but he was obviously not expecting a friend for he had already chosen his meal. To my horror when I looked at the menu, I found a set menu at a very reasonable price and he had ordered the first course, which was an onion soup, and my stomach cannot abide onions. If I left out the soup, I would find myself well in advance of him and I would be out of touch with him when I finished the last course.

Another watcher was stationed in sight of the door who would take over when he left, but I had to remain till then in sight of the doctor in case he was contacted during his meal. A doctor was always, of course, liable to a phone call when he was away from home, but the Star and Garter telephone would have been tapped as soon as we knew where he was in the habit of dining.

I allowed myself a glance at him every now and then when he lowered his eyes to the obnoxious soup. To me, he looked a thoroughly honest man. Why would an honest man be mixed up with the man of the cigarette? Then I remembered he was a doctor. A doctor doesn't judge his patients. If he had attended the deathbed of a murderer, that wouldn't have made him a murderer. If a priest

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appeared on our microdot file, would he be reasonably a guilty man? The doctor finished his soup and ordered roast beef. Reluctantly, I did the same. I had to keep in step, though I could already feel the effect of the onion soup. He was a slow eater and read a newspaper between bites. I was glad that he showed no interest in me. It confirmed my impression of his honesty. It was a cold night and I felt sorry for the watcher outside keeping his unnecessary vigil.

To my distress, the doctor ordered an apple tart to follow. The only alternative on the little restaurant's menu was an ice cream, but an ice cream needs to be eaten with some speed before it melts, so I was forced to order the tart. My trouble was I suffer from acidity, and when the doctor followed the tart with a piece of cheese I had to leave the table, for I felt the approach of diarrhoea. The lavatory was upstairs, and as I left I ordered my bill so as to be ready to leave on my return if the doctor didn't wait for coffee. If I found him with coffee, I could spin out the time with a little difficulty over change and when he left my colleague would take over. And see him safely home to bed, I thought with irritation at this unnecessary routine watch.

I won't go into the unsavory details of my diarrhoea—it was a severe one and more than five minutes had passed before I went downstairs to the restaurant. I found that the doctor had gone, and I thought with relief, My job is over. I would take something to ease my stomach when I got home.

As I paid my bill, I remarked to the waiter, an elderly man who, I found, was also the landlord, "Not much custom tonight."

"At night," he told me, "the bar trade's better. And we do more at lunchtime—passing motorists. But the doctor's a good regular and he likes simple food."

I felt it my duty to inquire a little more about our suspect.

"Doesn't he ever dine at home?"

"No, he's a single man."

"Not much custom for a doctor in a place this size?"

"There's always the flu. And babies. But, of course, his main work is up at the chemical factory. Two hundred men. Plenty of patients there. I hope you enjoyed your food, sir, and that we'll see you again. It's a small place but my own, and I keep a sharp eye on the kitchen."

"I can tell that. Here is my card."

"International Good Food Guide! My goodness! I never expected to see one of your fellows in my little place. So that's why you went to the lavatory?"

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"Yes. We always inspect those. And I looked in on the kitchen on my way," I lied. "I could tell at a glance—"

"What?"

"Clean. Which I already knew from the food it would be."

"It's very kind of you, sir. I do hope you'll come again."

"Not for a year. In the meanwhile, we'll give you a mention in the guide."

"I'm very honored, sir. Perhaps some of the big shots from the factory will read it."

"What I advise you in the meantime is to have at least two menus. Perhaps then we could promote you to a star."

"Never did I dream! When I tell the missus—"

"By the way, what do they do in the factory?"

"All sorts of medicines, sir. Even cures for the hiccups, they say. Me, I'm content with a bit of Eno's. It serves most purposes."

I bade him a warm goodbye and gave him a copy of the guide in which his restaurant would appear in the next edition. I was glad to be off because my stomach was still queasy and I had no further duties that day. I would go home and perhaps, as the man had reminded me, take a glass of Eno's.

I went outside and to my astonishment saw my fellow watcher pretending interest in a shop window across the road. He turned and saw me with equal astonishment.

"What the hell have you come out for?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for the doctor, of course."

"But the doctor's gone."

"He hasn't passed that door."

"Oh, the hell. There must be a back door."

"But why didn't you signal me as soon as you lost touch?"

"I had to go to the loo. I was gone only a few minutes and he wasn't there when I came down. He came in this way and I thought he'd gone out the same way and you'd be following him."

"He must have had suspicions."

"I took him for an honest man, whatever the damned microdots said."

"We've certainly messed things up this time."

That was exactly what my boss said when I reported to him. "You've badly messed things. You should never have left the restaurant before him. Even for a minute."

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"It was the onion soup and the tomatoes."

"Onion soup and tomatoes! Is that what I have to tell the big chief?"

"I had diarrhoea. I couldn't stay and shit in my trousers."

"You know I would have sacked you like a shot, if you hadn't made that splendid coup with the cigarette."

"You needn't sack me. I resign. But I'd swear—microdot or not—that man was honest. He was no traitor."

"Traitor is a silly word that journalists use. A traitor can be as honest as you or me. That chemical factory has connection with chemical warfare. A man can feel that chemical warfare is a betrayal of the world we have to live in. He could be fighting for something greater than his country. An honest spy is the most dangerous. He is not spying for money, he's spying for a cause. Look, that cigarette is more important than this mistake. One learns from mistakes, and you are a good learner. You have given me a good idea of how to use your mistake. He may have been suspicious of you. Or it may have been his regular drill. To go in by the front and go out by the back."

I said, "I can't go on. I'm sorry. I can't go on."

"But why? This mistake of yours will be forgiven and forgotten."

"But the onion soup. Tomatoes. And all the meat I have to eat. Garlic with the lamb. Cheese as well as dessert. Why do all these suspects have such a good appetite?"

"Perhaps it gives them time to observe the people around them."

"But *they* never seem to get diarrhoea."

"About your diarrhoea. I have no idea." He paused and played with his pencil. "Suppose we gave you a week's holiday?"

"I don't need a holiday except from onion soup, and tomatoes, etc."

"But I see a way of using them. Suppose you stayed a week at that little hotel and had all your meals there. The doctor would begin to accept you as a regular. You would consult him about your stomach. He might give you a treatment. Of course you would take nothing he gave you, for if he remained suspicious he might try to poison you. Any prescription he gave you would send on to us and we would have it examined. If there was anything dangerous about it, our suspicions would be confirmed and we would close in on him."

"And if they weren't?"

"We'd give him more time. He would need to have *his* suspicions confirmed, too, if he's a man with scruples. We would think of some way. A warning from somewhere would reach him. Or one of your

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own reports, perhaps. We would watch his reactions very closely. All you would need to do is—"

"To eat," I said. "No. I've made up my mind. I can't make a career out of eating. No more onion soup, no more tomatoes, no more garlic. I resign."

So it was that I abandoned the International Guide to Good Restaurants. Sometimes from curiosity, I buy a copy of the latest number. At least I have done one good deed in my life. The little country restaurant remains as a "mention" in the guide, though it has never received a star.

DETECTIVERSE

A TALE OF INTEREST

by DOROTHY BELLE POLLACK

Harvey was a teller
And he had a great thing going—
He used his special system
That the bank was far from knowing.

In handling big accounts,
Sometimes he'd deftly skim
Some money off the top,
Which promptly went to him.

He counted every week,
Soon saw his profits double,
Till an auditor got wise
And burst his little bubble.

Harv's uttered protestations
Were all of no avail.
Now he's still in there counting—
Not cash, but years in jail.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

MARGARET YORKE

Mrs. Watson found life hard alone, for Mr. Watson, fifteen years older than she, had cherished her all the twenty-five years of their life together. She had worked in his office as a bookkeeper: she was good at figures, and very pretty, and had soon attracted the attention of the rising Mr. Watson, who was looking about for a suitable wife—something he had been too busy to do sooner—for what was the point of amassing a fortune if you had no one to spend it on. . . ?

WIDOW'S MIGHT

by MARGARET YORKE

Mrs. Watson watched as the gardener, high on a ladder, lopped the branches of the tall palm in the hotel garden. Heavy trusses of berries fell to the ground, and the trunk of the tree bore smooth white spherical scars where he made his cuts. So death came, chopping down those who had lived too long or who had flirted with danger, or were doomed.

She sat in a comfortable chair in the shade of a pomegranate, a book on her knee. A gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the red hibiscus and the blue flowers of a plumbago that sprawled on a trellis beside the steps leading to the terrace. Though it was November, the island, warmed by the Gulf Stream, was never cold and seldom uncomfortably hot. Its jagged coastline bore a rash of large hotels, but Mrs. Watson's, one of the oldest, was also the most expensive and the most luxurious. Here, the ratio of staff to clients was almost one to one and, lapped in care, the pampered guests felt worries, aches, and pains slip away, forgotten.

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Mrs. Watson and her husband had first visited the island when on a cruise. Their liner had steamed in at daybreak and they had spent an interesting day visiting the cathedral and driving into the country in a taxi. They had passed banana plantations, waterfalls, and reached mountain areas where the air was fresh, and had had tea at this hotel where now she sat alone. Her husband had approved it as a suitable place for them to visit in the future.

Only there had been no future for Mr. Watson, for that very night, en route for Gibraltar, he had had a heart attack in their cabin on A deck and had died within minutes. Mrs. Watson and the coffin had flown home to a well attended funeral at the local crematorium, where representatives of the many organizations with which Mr. Watson had been connected, diluted with members of his staff and several workmen from the current sites he was developing, made up the congregation. There were no children of their union, no son to lead her to her pew, and Mrs. Watson proudly walked alone.

Mr. Watson had been a property developer, and by the terms of his will so long as the business prospered his wife would be well provided for. However, now it was in the hands of his partner. They had amalgamated when both were competing for a particularly desirable site in the center of a new town. A Dutch auction over it had seemed pointless at the time, and since then the two had worked well together. Now the partner was obliged to pay Mrs. Watson a large portion annually of his profits. This was satisfactory for several years, until the partner spread himself too far, the banks called in their loans, and the business fell apart.

Mrs. Watson was only forty-five when she became a widow. She was still trim and shapely, her hair burnished gold, rinsed regularly by Sandra at Bandbox Coiffures, and her complexion smooth. She found life hard alone, for Mr. Watson, fifteen years older than she, had cherished her all the twenty-five years of their life together. She had worked in his office as a bookkeeper: she was good at figures, and very pretty, and had soon attracted the attention of the rising Mr. Watson, who was looking about for a suitable wife—something he had been too busy to do sooner—for what was the point of amassing a fortune if you had no one to spend it on?

Mrs. Watson, then Madge Fraser, had grown up in a semidetached villa in Luton, where her father was a bank clerk and her mother devotedly kept house, running up frocks for Madge on her Singer machine and cooking nourishing meals, in between keeping the

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house spotless. In those days, women weren't expected to strive on all fronts as mothers, wives, and wage-earners, and couples who found themselves incompatible or bored with one another usually stayed together in civilized truce until or unless one of them was tempted away by a new love. However, Madge's parents were fond of each other and of their only child, pinning their ambitions and hopes on her, and when she married her boss, just as happened in the magazines her mother read, their joy and pride was boundless.

Madge went to live in Bletchley, in a new four-bedroom house with two bathrooms, a study, and a utility room, as well as a large lounge and dining room. It stood in nearly an acre of garden, all laid out and planted by a nursery man. Like her mother, Madge cleaned and baked, and in her spare time did *cross point* as there was no daughter to sew for or take to dancing class, nor was there an economical reason to dressmake for herself. She went to flower-arranging classes and art lessons to fill up her time, and gradually she became a gardener, rearranging what the nursery man had planned and devising new corners and grottos. She joined a gardening club and went with them on excursions to stately homes, where she secretly broke off shoots of plants to propagate through cuttings, building up a remarkable collection of shrubs unique in their neighborhood. Mr. Watson was proud of her green fingers and had no notion as to the true source of her acquisitions.

After Madge's father died, her mother stayed on in the house in Luton, but she accompanied the Watsons on their holidays, staying in hotels in Spain and villas in Greece, which she found rather hot. Eventually she expired peacefully in her sleep after a bout of flu, giving in death no more trouble than she had given in life and leaving Madge her worldly possessions, the house now free of its mortgage and a few pieces of jewelry.

Madge sold up and used the money to open a florist's shop which she named Rosa's, where she installed as assistant a woman she met in her flower-arranging class. Mr. Watson was amused at the venture and pleased with its success. "Madge's toy," he called it, "her baby, seeing as we've none of our own." The enterprise flourished and she opened a second shop in another district, then a third.

Her foraging trips to alien gardens grew fewer as the business absorbed her surplus energy and her administrative skills. By the time of Mr. Watson's demise, she was prospering in her own right, so that when his partner went officially bankrupt—though in fact he had siphoned away considerable funds in the name of his wife

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and daughter, enough to enable him to start up again when his debts were written off—she was able to maintain her customary standard of living. She continued to reside at Greenways, which property alone was now worth a considerable sum, enough to fund a comfortable life for Madge if her florists' shops failed. But they did not: they expanded and throve as Madge took on able managers, to whom she paid bonuses on turnover.

But she did not enjoy being a widow.

It wasn't simply that she missed the comfort of Mr. Watson's protection, his big warm body, his interest and his pampering: it was the rest of the condition that irked. She was unpartnered now, half of what had been a whole, an outcast in paired society. When traveling, her single state seemed as if it was a crime. People shunned her. Except in the best hotels, she was given an inferior room and at far higher cost than the rate for one half of a couple. Her table in the dining room would be near a service door or in a draught and the wine waiter would ignore her, although she always ordered a half bottle of the best local wine available. Sometimes she would be served rapidly, course following upon course so that she could be removed swiftly from the scene—at other times she would be neglected. Mrs. Watson never returned to hotels which treated her in this manner, but *here* nothing was too much trouble: she was tended to ceremoniously.

Here, it was the guests to whom she seemed invisible, and Mrs. Watson knew the reason. It was fear. The women were warned of the isolation that would be theirs when they became widows themselves, as statistically was quite probable, and the men were reminded of their own mortality.

When she was younger, Mrs. Watson had posed a different threat, though at the time she had been unaware of it because it had never occurred to her to embark on any sort of affair. With hindsight now, she recognized that she had been still pretty, even desirable, when she began to travel alone. At home she had been pursued, to her naive surprise, by one of her husband's cronies, an untimely widower, but she had soon made her lack of interest plain. She needed no meal ticket for her security, and her energies were directed toward her own business and her garden, where an aged man helped her keep down the weeds and cut the grass.

She observed the couples who came and went during her visits to various luxurious hotels, and she wondered which of them would

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still be together the following year, which would be parted either by death or by divorce. Because the hotels were expensive, most of the couples she encountered were older guests whose families had grown and flown, but sometimes there were honeymooners, shyly young among their elders and benignly smiled upon, and there were other couples obviously paired without the formality of a marriage certificate.

Mrs. Watson watched an elderly man and his wife cross the lawn and stiffly mount the stairs that led from the garden to the wide veranda where teas were served. The man carried his wife's knitting in its floral bag: Mrs. Watson had observed the wife turning the heel of a warm olive-green sock. Her own mother had knitted socks like that when Mrs. Watson was a schoolgirl during the war. Her father, myopic and flat-footed, had been spared the call-up but he was an air-raid warden and her mother was a member of a knitting party.

Mrs. Watson hadn't realized that people still wore hand-knitted socks. She wondered what work, if any, the husband had done—he was long past retiring age. With them was their son—unmistakable because he was so like the mother—and a daughter-in-law, a pale, elegant woman with an air of confident distinction. Breeding, thought Mrs. Watson, breaking off a spur on the red hibiscus—which, if it took, would replace one she had lost in a recent severe winter—breeding gave you that air of quiet arrogance, but would it be of help if your husband was struck down prematurely and you were left alone? Who, then, would open doors for you, carry hand luggage, park the car after dropping you at the door of wherever you were going, complain if a room was unsuitable or the service bad? She would not be left penniless, that elegant woman — there would be insurance if not family wealth—but that wasn't the only provision she would require.

The younger couple passed Mrs. Watson's chair, and the woman saw Mrs. Watson drop her hibiscus sprig into her bag.

At dinner, Mrs. Watson sat not far from the quartet. Ready to be pleasant, she smiled across at them but was ignored as she consumed her lobster bisque, her gnocchi, her chicken, then her chocolate mousse.

Leaving the dining room while the four were still eating, passing behind the younger woman's chair, Mrs. Watson heard her speak.

"That woman was stealing sprigs from the plants," she said in a clear voice. "I saw her do it. An hibiscus shoot today. What will it

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be tomorrow? A pomegranate, do you suppose? Perhaps she could grow one from the fruit."

"Charlotte, don't—she'll hear!" shushed the mother, whose own voice was more penetrating than her daughter-in-law's.

"Who cares?" was the answer. "It should be reported. If every guest did it, there'd be nothing left. She's like those people who come to Ferbingham. They've stripped whole sprays from the mulberry—some of the choicest shrubs are decimated. We've had to put notices up and we may have to employ special patrols."

Mrs. Watson, moving slowly, had heard most of this. So they lived at Ferbingham, did they? She had visited that garden and had a shoot from the well known mulberry rooted and beginning to sprout. Ferbingham was a Tudor mansion opened on certain selected dates in the year. Mrs. Watson knew that the elder couple had moved to the dower house some years ago, leaving their son to manage the estate.

She made up her mind that night. The supercilious Charlotte should be this year's victim. Every time she went away, she chose one—and had been foiled only once, when her target had left before she could carry out her plan, leaving no time for a substitute to be picked. Mrs. Watson never returned for a second visit to any hotel, however enjoyable her stay—it didn't do to retrace one's steps lest a second incident might seem more than coincidence.

Last year, in Montreux, vulgarity had been the trigger. She had felt shame, witnessing the brash conduct of a couple who, as they acquired money and the spurious status it bought, had not acquired manners to match. This year it was an excess of conceit and condescension that were significant.

Last year, near a cable-car station there had been a fatal fall from a cliff. No one had suspected the white-haired widow (Madge had abandoned her gold rinse years ago) who reported witnessing the fall of being its cause. The man had strayed from his wife: the side of the mountain was steep and the sudden shove totally unexpected.

This year, opportunity and method might be less easy.

Mrs. Watson stalked her prey and heard them order a taxi to visit the Botanical Gardens which, she knew, were high on a hillside—she had been there already herself.

She was there an hour before they arrived. She had walked around seeking possible hazards, and admired lilies and orchids, glossy scarlet anthurium which looked waxen, strelitzia—the birds-of-paradise

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flowers—the pendulous trumpets of datura, which was a poisonous plant. She leaned on the walking stick she often carried—a versatile accessory—and gazed across the ravine dividing the hills to where the distant sea shone blue. There was no cruise ship in today and, late in the season as it was, there were few visitors to the gardens that day. Then she saw the elderly mother approaching along a side path, pausing to gaze at various plants. She was with her son. Looking about, Mrs. Watson saw no sign of Charlotte or her father-in-law. Perhaps they had decided not to come.

It proved to be so. She watched carefully, making sure they were absent: so much the better for her purpose. The old woman and her son—his name was Hugo, Mrs. Watson had heard it spoken—consulted the labels attached to various plants, moving slowly to a viewpoint where, protected by a low stone parapet built less than a yard from the sheer drop beyond, one could gaze in safety at the vista. She made an entry in a small red notebook where she listed plants seen and identified. As she wrote down the name of an unusual cactus—she did not like cacti—fate played into her hands, for Hugo, ahead of his mother approaching the spot where Mrs. Watson was waiting, called out to the old lady: "There'll be a wonderful view here."

"You go ahead," she replied, "you know I don't care for heights. I'll wait for you near those lilies we liked. We might note some varieties and see if we can order the bulbs."

She turned and walked down a cobbled path, vanishing from sight around a bend, and Hugo advanced toward where Mrs. Watson stood. She surreptitiously dropped her notebook over the parapet and, before uttering small cries of distress, leaned over to poke at it with her stick till it lodged in a small bush on the edge of the ravine. Hugo, ever civil, although aware that this was the woman his wife had seen snipping cuttings from plants in the hotel garden, made concerned inquiries as to what was wrong.

"My references!" cried Mrs. Watson. "My checklist of flowers I've seen and identified—I've dropped it!" And she leaned over the parapet, gazing at the spot where, only just out of reach, the small notebook reposed.

"It's important, is it?" asked Hugo.

"Vital! It's the only record I've got!" Mrs. Watson declared. "I have to give a talk to my group when I get home!" She looked at him. "You're very tall. Couldn't you reach it?"

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"Hardly," said Hugo with a grimace. "I might simply knock it over the hillside down the ravine."

"I'll climb over and get it, then," said Mrs. Watson. "Perhaps you'd just hold my arm to steady me."

"I can't let you do that!" exclaimed Hugo, looking aghast at Mrs. Watson, five foot two inches tall and no longer young. "I'll have a go—my arms are longer."

"Oh, no—" Hand to mouth. Mrs. Watson demurred.

Hugo, carried back to boyhood days of derring-do, swung one leg over the low wall, then the other, and crouched low out of sight of anyone who might come toward them. The ledge was narrow, but though he held the wall at first he found he couldn't reach the notebook without releasing his grasp.

He had just seized it when he felt a sudden jab in the small of his back. Mrs. Watson, pushing with all her might, had feared she would lack the strength to make him lose his balance, but she succeeded—and, uttering only a strangled cry, he tore at a bush which broke off in his hand as he hurtled toward the valley.

Mrs. Watson held back her piteous cries and shrieks for a few vital seconds, making sure he had fallen satisfactorily and fatally far before raising the alarm.

When retrieved, Hugo's body bore a great many bruises and the sharp round one caused by the ferrule of Mrs. Watson's walking stick aroused no special interest. She said, with truth, that he had insisted on climbing over the wall to rescue her notebook, which most foolishly she had dropped. "I tried to persuade him it was of no consequence," she declared, weeping gently, "but he insisted."

The notebook was still clutched in his hand. It contained, as she had said, a list of a great many plants, but it wasn't just what she had seen on the island—it was of more significance, for each plant noted was special. The oleander was a memory of Crete, and an accident in a swimming pool. An agapanthus meant a fall at Lindos. A gentian reminded her of Lausanne and sleeping pills in brandy, followed by a lakeside walk in the dusk. There were others.

Perhaps a camellia should represent Hugo?

It didn't do to mock at widows. Their ranks increased all the time. Now it was Charlotte's turn.

Who would be next?

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a distinguished reprint by

JACK FINNEY

We're reprinting "I'm Scared" from the story collection About Time *by Jack Finney, featured by publisher Simon & Schuster as "More Time Travel Stories from the Author of the Beloved Classic* Time and Again"*— a delightful novel your editor recommends with the greatest enthusiasm to any readers who haven't yet read (and reread) it.*

"One should never use the word 'fun' as an adjective except when referring to the writings of Jack Finney," has said The San Francisco Examiner. *We're proud to claim publication of Mr. Finney's first fun in print—professionally, anyway: "The Widow's Walk" in the July 1947 issue. "I'm Scared," like all of the author's fiction we've read, is as timely—and timeless—as when it first saw the light of day in 1957 . . .*

I'M SCARED

by JACK FINNEY

I'm very badly scared, not so much for myself—I'm a grey-haired man of sixty-six, after all—but for you and everyone else who has not yet lived out his life. For I believe that certain dangerous things have recently begun to happen in the world. They are noticed here and there, idly discussed, then dismissed and forgotten. Yet I am convinced that unless these occurrences are recognized for what they are, the world will be plunged into a nightmare. Judge for yourself.

One evening last winter I came home from a chess club to which I belong. I'm a widower; I live alone in a small but comfortable

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three-room apartment overlooking lower Fifth Avenue. It was still fairly early and I switched on a lamp beside my leather easy chair, picked up a murder mystery I'd been reading, and turned on the radio; I did not, I'm sorry to say, notice which station it was tuned to.

The tubes warmed, and the music of an accordion—faint at first, then louder—came from the loudspeaker. Since it was good music for reading, I adjusted the volume control and began to read.

Now, I want to be absolutely factual and accurate about this, and I do not claim that I paid close attention to the radio. But I do know that presently the music stopped and an audience applauded. Then a man's voice, chuckling and pleased with the applause, said, "All right, all right," but the applause continued for several more seconds. During that time the voice once more chuckled appreciatively, then firmly repeated, "All right," and the applause died down. "That was Alec Somebody-or-other," the radio voice said, and I went back to my book.

But I soon became aware of this middle-aged voice again; perhaps a change of tone as he turned to a new subject caught my attention. "And now, Miss Ruth Greeley," he was saying, "of Trenton, New Jersey. Miss Greeley is a pianist; that right?" A girl's voice, timid and barely audible, said, "That's right, Major Bowes." The man's voice—and now I recognized his familiar singsong delivery—said, "And what are you going to play?" The girl replied, "La Paloma." The man repeated it after her, as an announcement: "La Paloma." There was a pause, then an introductory chord sounded from a piano and I resumed my reading.

As the girl played, I was half aware that her style was mechanical, her rhythm defective; perhaps she was nervous. Then my attention was fully aroused once more by a gong which sounded suddenly. For a few notes more the girl continued to play falteringly, not sure what to do. The gong sounded jarringly again, the playing abruptly stopped, and there was a restless murmur from the audience. "All right, all right," said the now-familiar voice, and I realized I'd been expecting this, knowing it would say just that. The audience quieted, and the voice began, "Now—"

The radio went dead. For the smallest fraction of a second no sound issued from it but its own mechanical hum. Then a completely different program came from the loudspeaker; the recorded voice of Andy Williams singing "Poor Butterfly," a favorite of mine. So I returned once more to my reading, wondering vaguely what had

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happened to the other program, but not actually thinking about it until I finished my book and began to get ready for bed.

Then, undressing in my bedroom, I remembered that Major Bowes was dead. Years had passed, a decade, since that dry chuckle and familiar "All right, all right" had been heard in the nation's living rooms.

Well, what does one do when the apparently impossible occurs? It simply made a good story to tell friends, and more than once I was asked if I'd recently heard Moran and Mack, a pair of radio comedians popular some thirty years ago, or Floyd Gibbons, an old-time news broadcaster. And there were other joking references to my crystal radio set.

But one man—this was at a lodge meeting the following Thursday—listened to my story with utter seriousness, and when I had finished he told me a queer little story of his own. He is a thoughtful, intelligent man, and as I listened I was not frightened but puzzled at what seemed to be a connecting link, a common denominator, between this story and the odd behavior of my radio. The following day, since I am retired and have plenty of time, I took the trouble of making a two-hour train trip to Connecticut in order to verify the story at firsthand. I took detailed notes, and the story appears in my files now as follows:

Case 2. Louis Trachnor, coal and wood dealer, R.F.D. 1, Danbury, Connecticut, aged fifty-four.

On July 20, 1956, Mr. Trachnor told me, he walked out on the front porch of his house about six o'clock in the morning. Running from the eaves of his house to the floor of the porch was a streak of grey paint, still damp. "It was about the width of an eight-inch brush," Mr. Trachnor told me, "and it looked like hell, because the house was white. I figured some kids did it in the night for a joke, but if they did, they had to get a ladder up to the eaves and you wouldn't figure they'd go to that much trouble. It wasn't smeared, either; it was a careful job, a nice even stripe straight down the front of the house."

Mr. Trachnor got a ladder and cleaned off the grey paint with turpentine.

In October of that same year, Mr. Trachnor painted his house. "The white hadn't held up so good, so I painted it grey. I got to the front last and finished about five one Saturday afternoon. Next morning when I came out, I saw a streak of white right down the front of the house. I figured it was the damned kids again, because

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it was the same place as before. But when I looked close, I saw it wasn't new paint; it was the old white I'd painted over. Somebody had done a nice careful job of cleaning off the new paint in a long stripe about eight inches wide right down from the eaves! Now, who the hell would go to that trouble? I just can't figure it out."

Do you see the link between this story and mine? Suppose for a moment that something had happened, on each occasion, to disturb briefly the orderly progress of time. That seemed to have happened in my case; for a matter of some seconds I apparently heard a radio broadcast that had been made years before. Suppose, then, that no one had touched Mr. Trachnor's house but himself; that he had painted his house in October and that through some fantastic mixup in time a portion of that paint appeared on his house the previous summer. Since he had cleaned the paint off at that time, a broad stripe of new grey paint was missing *after* he painted his house in the fall.

I would be lying, however, if I said I really believed this. It was merely an intriguing speculation, and I told both these little stories to friends simply as curious anecdotes. I am a sociable person, see a good many people, and occasionally I hear other odd stories in response to mine.

Someone would nod and say, "Reminds me of something I heard recently—" and I would have one more to add to my collection. A man on Long Island received a telephone call from his sister in New York on Friday evening. She insists that she did not make this call until the following Monday, three days later. At the Forty-fifth Street branch of the Chase National Bank, I was shown a check deposited the day before it was written. A letter was delivered on East Sixty-eighth Street in New York City just seventeen minutes after it was dropped into a mailbox on the main street of Green River, Wyoming.

And so on, and so on; my stories were now in demand at parties and I told myself that collecting and verifying them was a hobby. But the day I heard Julia Eisenberg's story, I knew it was no longer that.

Case 17. Julia Eisenberg, office worker, New York City, aged thirty-one.

Miss Eisenberg lives in a small walk-up apartment in Greenwich Village. I talked to her there after a chess-club friend who lives in her neighborhood had repeated to me a somewhat garbled version

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of her story, which was told to him by the doorman of the building he lives in.

In October, 1954, about eleven at night, Miss Eisenberg left her apartment to walk to the drugstore for toothpaste. On her way back, not far from her apartment, a large black-and-white dog ran up to her and put his front paws on her chest.

"I made the mistake of petting him," Miss Eisenberg told me, "and from then on he simply wouldn't leave. When I went into the lobby of my building, I actually had to push him away to get the door closed. I felt sorry for him, poor hound, and a little guilty, because he was still sitting at the door an hour later when I looked out my front window."

This dog remained in the neighborhood for three days, discovering and greeting Miss Eisenberg with wild affection each time she appeared on the street. "When I'd get on the bus in the morning to go to work, he'd sit on the curb looking after me in the most mournful way, poor thing. I wanted to take him in, and I wish with all my heart that I had, but I knew he'd never go home then, and I was afraid whoever owned him would be sorry to lose him. No one in the neighborhood knew who he belonged to, and finally he disappeared."

Two years later, a friend gave Miss Eisenberg a three-week-old puppy. "My apartment is really too small for a dog, but he was such a darling I couldn't resist. Well, he grew up into a nice big dog who ate more than I did."

Since the neighborhood was quiet and the dog well behaved, Miss Eisenberg usually unleashed him when she walked him at night, for he never strayed far. "One night—I'd last seen him sniffing around in the dark a few doors down—I called to him and he didn't come back. And he never did; I never saw him again.

"Now, our street is a solid wall of brownstone buildings on both sides, with locked doors and no areaways. He *couldn't* have disappeared like that, he just *couldn't*. But he did."

Miss Eisenberg hunted for her dog for many days afterward, inquired of neighbors, put ads in the papers, but she never found him. "Then one night I was getting ready for bed. I happened to glance out the front window down at the street and suddenly I remembered something I'd forgotten all about. I remembered the dog I'd chased away over two years before." Miss Eisenberg looked at me for a moment, then she said flatly, "It was the same dog. If you own a dog you *know* him, you can't be mistaken, and I tell you it was the same

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dog. Whether it makes sense or not, my dog was lost—I chased him away—two years before he was born."

She began to cry silently, the tears running down her face. "Maybe you think I'm crazy, or a little lonely and overly sentimental about a dog. But you're wrong." She brushed at her tears with a handkerchief. "I'm a well balanced person—as much as anyone is these days, at least—and I tell you I *know* what happened."

It was in that moment, sitting in Miss Eisenberg's neat, shabby living room, that I realized fully that the consequences of these odd little incidents could be something more than merely intriguing; that they might, quite possibly, be tragic. It was in that moment that I began to be afraid.

I have spent the last eleven months discovering and tracking down these strange occurrences, and I am astonished and frightened at how many there are. I am astonished and frightened at how much more frequently they are happening now, and—I hardly know how to express this—at their increasing power to tear human lives tragically apart. This is an example, selected almost at random, of the increasing strength of—whatever it is that is happening in the world.

Case 34. Paul V. Kerch, accountant, the Bronx, aged thirty-one.

On a bright clear Sunday afternoon, I met an unsmiling family of three at their Bronx apartment: Mr. Kerch, a chunky, darkly good-looking young man; his wife, a pleasant-faced, dark-haired woman in her late twenties, whose attractiveness was marred by circles under her eyes; and their son, a nice-looking boy of six or seven. After introductions, the boy was sent to his room at the back of the house to play.

"All right," Mr. Kerch said wearily then, and walked toward a bookcase, "let's get at it. You said on the phone that you know the story in general." It was half a question, half a statement.

"Yes," I said.

He took a book from the top shelf and removed some photographs from it. "There are the pictures." He sat down on the davenport beside me with the photographs in his hand. "I own a pretty good camera, I'm a fair amateur photographer, and I have a darkroom setup in the kitchen—do my own developing. Two weeks ago, we went down to Central Park." His voice was a tired monotone, as though this were a story he'd repeated many times, aloud and in his mind. "It was nice, like today, and the kid's grandmothers have been pestering us for pictures, so I took a whole roll of film, pictures of

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all of us. My camera can be set up and focused and it will snap the picture automatically a few seconds later, giving me time to get around in front of it and get in the picture myself."

There was a tired, hopeless look in his eyes as he handed me all but one of the photographs. "These are the first ones I took," he said. The photographs were all fairly large, perhaps 5 x 7", and I examined them closely.

They were ordinary enough, very sharp and detailed, and each showed the family of three in various smiling poses. Mr. Kerch wore a light business suit, his wife had on a dark dress and a cloth coat, and the boy wore a dark suit with knee-length pants. In the background stood a tree with bare branches. I glanced up at Mr. Kerch, signifying that I had finished my study of the photographs.

"The last picture," he said, holding it in his hand ready to give to me, "I took exactly like the others. We agreed on the pose, I set the camera, walked around in front, and joined my family. Monday night I developed the whole roll. This is what came out on the last negative." He handed me the photograph.

For an instant it seemed to me like merely one more photograph in the group; then I saw the difference. Mr. Kerch looked much the same, bare-headed and grinning broadly, but he wore an entirely different suit. The boy, standing beside him, wore long pants, was a good three inches taller, obviously older, but equally obviously the same boy. The woman was an entirely different person. Dressed smartly, her light hair catching the sun, she was very pretty and attractive, and she was smiling into the camera, holding Mr. Kerch's hand.

I looked up at him. "Who is this?"

Wearily, Mr. Kerch shook his head. "I don't know," he said sullenly, then suddenly exploded: "I don't *know!* I've never seen her in my life!" He turned to look at his wife, but she would not return his glance, and he turned back to me, shrugging. "Well, there you have it," he said. "The whole story." And he stood up, thrusting both hands into his trouser pockets, and began to pace about the room, glancing often at his wife, talking to *her* actually, though he addressed his words to me. "So who is she? How could the camera have snapped that picture? I've never seen that woman in my life!"

I glanced at the photograph again, then bent closer. "The trees here are in full bloom," I said. Behind the solemn-faced boy, the grinning man, and the smiling woman, the trees of Central Park were in full summer leaf.

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Mr. Kerch nodded. "I know," he said bitterly. "And you know what *she* says?" he burst out, glaring at his wife. "She says that *is* my wife in the photograph, my *new* wife a couple of years from now! God!" He slapped both hands down on his head. "The ideas a woman can get!"

"What do you mean?" I glanced at Mrs. Kerch, but she ignored me, remaining silent, her lips tight.

Kerch shrugged hopelessly. "She says that photograph shows how things will be a couple of years from now. She'll be dead or"—he hesitated, then said the word bitterly—"divorced, and I'll have our son and be married to the woman in the picture."

We both looked at Mrs. Kerch, waiting until she was obliged to speak.

"Well, if it isn't so," she said, shrugging a shoulder, "then tell me what that picture does mean."

Neither of us could answer that, and a few minutes later I left. There was nothing much I could say to the Kerches; certainly I couldn't mention my conviction that, whatever the explanation of the last photograph, their married life was over.

Case 72. Lieutenant Alfred Eichler, New York Police Department, aged thirty-three.

In the late evening of January 9, 1956, two policemen found a revolver lying just off a gravel path near an East Side entrance of Central Park. The gun was examined for fingerprints at the police laboratory and several were found. One bullet had been fired from the revolver and the police fired another, which was studied and classified by a ballistics expert. The fingerprints were checked and found in police files; they were those of a minor hoodlum with a record of assault.

A routine order to pick him up was sent out. A detective called at the rooming house where he was known to live, but he was out, and, since no unsolved shootings had occurred recently, no intensive search for him was made that night.

The following evening a man was shot and killed in Central Park with the same gun. This was proved ballistically past all question of error. It was soon learned that the murdered man had been quarreling with a friend in a nearby tavern. The two men, both drunk, had left the tavern together. And the second man was the hoodlum whose gun had been found the previous night, and was still locked in a police safe.

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As Lieutenant Eichler said to me, "It's impossible that the dead man was killed with that same gun, but he was. Don't ask me how, though—and if anybody thinks we'd go into court with a case like that, they're crazy."

Case 111. Captain Hubert V. Rihm, New York Police Department, retired, aged sixty-six.

I met Captain Rihm by appointment one morning in Stuyvesant Park, a patch of greenery, wood benches, and asphalt surrounded by the city, on lower Second Avenue. "You want to hear about the Fentz case, do you?" he said after we had introduced ourselves and found an empty bench. "All right, I'll tell you. I don't like to talk about it—it bothers me—but I'd like to see what you think." He was a big, rather heavy man with a red, tough face and he wore an old police jacket and uniform cap with the insigne removed.

"I was up at the city mortuary," he began as I took out my notebook and pencil, "at Bellevue about twelve one night, drinking coffee with one of the interns. This was in June 1955, just before I retired, and I was in Missing Persons. They brought this guy in and he was a funny-looking character. Had a beard. A young guy, maybe thirty, but he wore regular muttonchop whiskers, and his clothes were funny-looking. Now, I was thirty years on the force and I've seen a lot of queer guys killed on the streets. We found an Arab once, in full regalia, and it took us a week to find out who he was. So it wasn't just the way the guy looked that bothered me; it was the stuff we found in his pockets."

Captain Rihm turned on the bench to see if he'd caught my interest, then continued. "There was about a dollar in change in the dead guy's pocket, and one of the boys picked up a nickel and showed it to me. Now, you've seen plenty of nickels, the new ones with Jefferson's picture, the buffalo nickels they made before that, and once in a while you still see even the old Liberty-head nickels; they quit making them before the First World War. But this one was even older than that. It had a shield on the front, a U.S. shield, and a big five on the back; I used to see that kind when I was a boy. And the funny thing was, that old nickel looked new—what coin dealers call 'mint condition,' like it was made the day before yesterday. The date on that nickel was 1876, and there wasn't a coin in his pocket dated any later."

Captain Rihm looked at me questioningly. "Well," I said, glancing up from my notebook, "that could happen."

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"Sure it could," he answered in a satisfied tone, "but all the pennies he had were Indian-head pennies. Now, when did you see one of *them* last? There was even a silver three-cent piece—looked like an old-style dime, only smaller. And the bills in his wallet, every one of them, were old-time bills, the big kind."

Captain Rihm leaned forward and spat on the path, a needle-jet of tobacco juice, an expression of a policeman's annoyed contempt for anything deviating from an orderly norm.

"Over seventy bucks in cash, and not a Federal reserve note in the lot. There were two yellow-back tens. Remember them? They were payable in gold. The rest were old national-bank notes; you remember them, too. Issued direct by local banks, personally signed by the bank president; that kind used to be counterfeited a lot.

"Well," Captain Rihm continued, leaning back on the bench and crossing his knees, "there was a bill in his pocket from a livery stable on Lexington Avenue: three dollars for feeding and stabling his horse and washing a carriage. There was a brass slug in his pocket good for a five-cent beer at some saloon. There was a letter postmarked Philadelphia, June 1876, with an old-style two-cent stamp, and a bunch of cards in his wallet. The cards had his name and address on them, and so did the letter."

"Oh," I said, a little surprised, "you identified him right away, then?"

"Sure. Rudolph Fentz, some address on Fifth Avenue—I forget the exact number—in New York City. No problem at all." Captain Rihm leaned forward and spat again. "Only that address wasn't a residence. It's a store, and it has been for years, and nobody there ever heard of any Rudolph Fentz, and there's no such name in the phonebook, either. Nobody ever called or made any inquiries about the guy, and Washington didn't have his prints. There was a tailor's name in his coat, a lower Broadway address, but nobody there ever heard of this tailor."

"What was so strange about his clothes?"

The captain said, "Well, did you ever know anyone who wore a pair of pants with big black-and-white checks, cut very narrow, no cuffs, and pressed without a crease?"

I had to think for a moment. "Yes," I said then, "my father, when he was a very young man, before he was married; I've seen old photographs."

"Sure," said Captain Rihm, "and he probably wore a short sort of cutaway coat with two cloth-covered buttons at the back, a vest with

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lapels, a tall silk hat, a big black oversize bowtie on a turned-up stiff collar, and button shoes."

"That's how this man was dressed?"

"Like eighty years ago! And him no more than thirty years old. There was a label in his hat, a Twenty-third Street hat store that went out of business around the turn of the century. Now, what do you make out of a thing like that?"

"Well," I said carefully, "there's nothing much you *can* make of it. Apparently someone went to a lot of trouble to dress up in an antique style; the coins and bills I assume he could buy at a coin dealer's. And then he got himself killed in a traffic accident."

"Got himself killed is right. Eleven-fifteen at night in Times Square—the theaters letting out, busiest time and place in the world—and this guy shows up in the middle of the street, gawking and looking around at the cars and up at the signs like he'd never seen them before. The cop on duty noticed him, so you can see how he must have been acting. The lights change, the traffic starts up with him in the middle of the street, and instead of waiting, the damned fool, he turns and tries to make it back to the sidewalk. A cab got him and he was dead when he hit."

For a moment Captain Rihm sat chewing his tobacco and staring angrily at a young woman pushing a baby carriage, though I'm sure he didn't see her. The young mother looked at him in surprise as she passed, and the captain continued:

"Nothing you can make out of a thing like that. We found out nothing. I started checking through our file of old phonebooks just as routine, but without much hope because they only go back so far. But in the 1939 summer edition I found a Rudolph Fentz, Jr., somewhere on East Fifty-second Street. He'd moved away in 'forty-two, though, the building super told me, and was a man in his sixties besides, retired from business—used to work in a bank a few blocks away, the super thought. I found the bank where he'd worked, and they told me he'd retired in 'forty and had been dead for five years—his widow was living in Florida with a sister.

"I wrote to the widow, but there was only one thing she could tell us, and that was no good. I never even reported it—not officially, anyway. Her husband's father had disappeared when her husband was a boy maybe two years old. He went out for a walk around ten one night—his wife thought cigar smoke smelled up the curtains, so he used to take a little stroll before he went to bed and smoke a cigar—and he didn't come back, and was never seen or heard of

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again. The family spent a good deal of money trying to locate him, but they never did. This was in the middle 1870s sometime—the old lady wasn't sure of the exact date. Her husband hadn't ever said too much about it.

"And that's all," said Captain Rihm. "Once I put in one of my afternoons off hunting through a bunch of old police records and I finally found the Missing Persons file for 1876. And Rudolph Fentz was listed, all right. There wasn't much of a description, and no fingerprints, of course. I'd give a year of my life, even now, and maybe sleep better nights, if they'd had his fingerprints. He was listed as twenty-nine years old, wearing full muttonchop whiskers, a tall silk hat, dark coat, and checked pants. That's about all it said. Didn't say what kind of tie or vest or if his shoes were the button kind. His name was Rudolph Fentz and he lived at this address on Fifth Avenue; it must have been a residence then. Final disposition of case: not located.

"Now, I hate that case," Captain Rihm said quietly. "I hate it and I wish I'd never heard of it. What do *you* think?" he demanded suddenly, angrily. "You think this guy walked off into thin air in 1876 and showed up again in 1955?"

I shrugged noncommittally, and the captain took it to mean no.

"No, of course not," he said. "Of *course* not, but—give me some other explanation."

I could go on. I could give you several hundred such cases. A sixteen-year-old girl walked out of her bedroom one morning carrying her clothes in her hand because they were too big for her, and she was quite obviously eleven years old again. And there are other occurrences too horrible for print. All of them have happened in the New York City area alone, all within the last few years, and I suspect thousands more have occurred, and are occurring, all over the world. I could go on, but the point is this: What is happening and *why?* I believe that I know.

Haven't you noticed, too, on the part of nearly everyone you know, a growing rebellion against the *present?* And an increasing longing for the past? I have. Never before in all my long life have I heard so many people wish that they lived "at the turn of the century," or "when life was simpler" or "worth living," or "when you could bring children into the world and count on the future," or simply "in the good old days." People didn't talk that way when I was young. The present was a glorious time! But they talk that way now.

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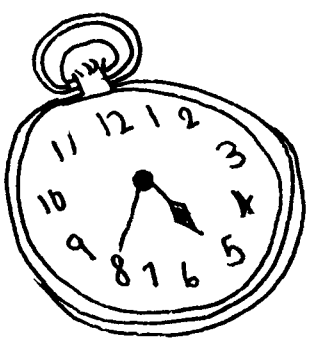
For the first time in man's history, man is desperate to escape the present. Our newsstands are jammed with escape literature, the very name of which is significant. Entire magazines are devoted to fantastic stories of escape—to other times, past and future, to other worlds and planets—escape to anywhere but here and now. Even our larger magazines, book publishers, and Hollywood are beginning to meet the rising demand for this kind of escape.

Yes, there's a craving in the world like a thirst, a terrible mass pressure that you can almost feel, of millions of minds struggling against the barriers of time. I am utterly convinced that this terrible mass pressure of millions of minds is already, slightly but definitely, affecting time itself. In the moments when this happens—when the almost universal longing to escape is greatest—my incidents occur. Man is disturbing the clock of time, and I'm afraid it will break. When it does, I leave to your imagination the last few hours of madness that will be left to us—all the countless moments that now make up our lives suddenly ripped apart and chaotically tangled in time.

Well, I have lived most of my life; I can be robbed of only a few more years. But it seems too bad—this universal craving to escape what could be a rich, productive, happy world. We live on a planet well able to provide a decent life for every soul on it, which is all ninety-nine of a hundred human beings ask. Why in the world can't we have it?



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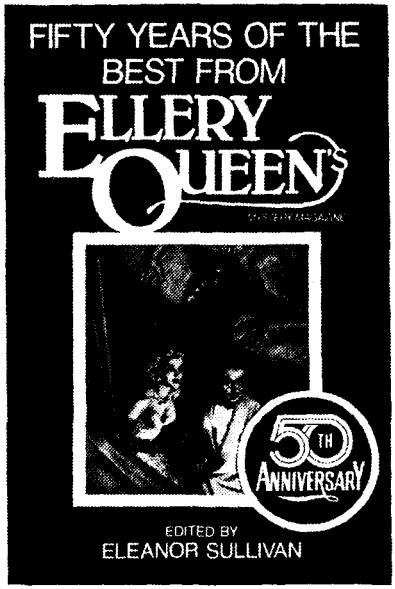

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This would be the last one, Henry thought. Too bad it had to be a woman. But he had no choice—he owed a lot of money, and one way or the other he had to pay Doucette back . . .

THE ORPHAN

by SCOTT MACKAY

Henry Stevens loosened his red bowtie, took off his blazer and his boater, put them on the table, and looked out at the town plaza through his hotel window. A persistent rain polished the cobblestones, drenched the palm trees in front of the train station, and washed the filth in the gutters down the boulevard. A large wagon, drawn by six donkeys and driven by two sombreroed peasants, carried thirty barrels of crude oil to the steamship depot, its wooden wheels echoing over the square.

His eyes settled on a small blue house on the corner, now empty, its windows dark. She had to run, he thought. No easy thing for a woman with two small children. She had to run because her husband was dead and she knew too much.

He turned from the window and walked to the bed. He fished in the sleeve of his suitcase and pulled out the photograph Howard Downing had given him. Colette Lambert. She was petite—doll-like, with round eyes and bobbed brown hair. In this photograph she wore a silk flapper's dress. Killing wasn't Henry Stevens' usual business, and he had never killed a woman before. His usual business was running rum through the Keys to Miami.

He turned the photograph over. Somebody's handwriting. Possibly Neil Lambert's. Colette, New York, 1928. Five years ago.

He leaned over, put the photograph in his blazer pocket, and stood up. He walked to the sink in the corner and looked at himself in the small scrap of mirror. Henry, you look old. Too many late nights, too much Cuban rum. He turned on the tap and a trickle of cold water sputtered into the sink, brown with rust.

He splashed his face, then rubbed it dry with a towel. This was no time to brood over bad choices and lost chances, he thought. He

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changed his shirt and trousers and put on a new bowtie. He was here, out of danger, far away from Doucette, and that was more than he could have hoped for a month ago. He checked his wallet, then pulled on his raincoat. He got his gun from his suitcase, inserted six cartridges, and put it in his pocket. Henry Stevens, hired killer. He didn't like the sound of that. He was meant for better things. He put on his boater and left the room.

He walked past the potted ferns to the ancient cage lift. This would be the last one, he thought. Too bad it had to be a woman. But he had no choice—he owed a lot of money, and one way or the other he had to pay Doucette back.

At the Trujillo offices of Delta Oil Limited, he rang the bell and waited on the covered stoop.

Two minutes later, Cipriano Rivero came to the door.

Rivero, a short balding man in his late fifties, looked up at him with nervous eyes. "Senor Stevens?" he asked.

"Si," said Stevens.

Rivero looked at him for a few vacant moments, then gave him a tired nod and opened the door. "Please, senor, come in. Nobody is here. I've been waiting for you."

Stevens followed the clerk through the vestibule into the reception area. Rivero walked around the counter with small quick steps, opened his desk, and took out a key. It was a skeleton key and looked as if it might open any number of doors. Rivero came back around the counter and clutched Stevens by the sleeve. "Come," he said. "We go."

They walked in silence through the rain. It was almost dark. They hurried across the plaza, Stevens lagging behind. He couldn't see the point of all the hurry.

When Rivero got to the door of the blue house, he stopped and waited for Stevens to catch up. It was a two-story house with a covered balcony. Two potted orchids stood on either end of the balustrade. The blinds were shut and a small For Rent sign hung in the window.

Stevens joined Rivero on the front porch. "One thing you should understand, senor," said Rivero, "the nearest police officer is over two hundred miles away, in Maracaibo. When night falls, Trujillo is a lawless town. There are those who would kill you for the clothes on your back."

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Rivero fit the key into the lock and opened the door. They went inside.

A front hall led directly into a salon. Rivero tried the light switch. The hall's small chandelier didn't come on. On its best days, Trujillo had no more than three hours of electrical service and during the rainy season the cable from Maracaibo often washed out altogether. Stevens took out his wooden all-weather matches.

Stevens found a candelabra and lit two of the five candles. The salon was bathed in a murky glow. Some of the furniture was covered in white canvas and two packing trunks had been partially filled with books, paintings, and ornaments. The salon looked as if it had been suddenly abandoned. He went into the kitchen, holding the candelabra in front of him. Black and white tiles covered the floor. Stevens held the candelabra high. Blood. All over the counter and the floor—patterned with footprints and handprints. "Is this where she killed Senor Downing?" he called.

"Si." Rivero's voice sounded muffled, dull, as if he didn't wish to discuss Peter Downing's murder. "What was she to do? He threatened her children."

The blood was old and dry, turning brown.

Stevens followed the blood to a back door. A few steps led to a shared courtyard. He heard Rivero's feet padding into the kitchen after him. A dog, one of those tan-colored strays seen so often in Venezuela, trotted across the courtyard, sniffed the base of the crumbling fountain, then continued across the grass and disappeared down the lane.

"This is where we found him," said Rivero. "Look—you can see one of her footprints in his blood. Maybe she tried to drag the body outside but then decided he was too heavy. He was a big man, Senor Stevens, all muscle and no fat."

Stevens closed the door, knelt, and examined the footprint. A flat-soled shoe, about a women's size six. "What about this footprint here?" he asked. "It's bigger."

"That?" said Rivero, twisting his chin to one side. "That would be Pinta's footprint."

"Who's Pinta?"

"The maid. A *campesina* woman. She was here often. To help clean and look after the children. She and Senora Lambert became good friends."

Stevens gazed at the maid's footprint for several moments, then walked back into the living room. "Any idea where this maid might live?"

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Rivero followed him into the salon. "No, Senor Stevens. Oscar Quintano can tell you. He's been here longer than I. I keep my world small. The office, home, the *cantina*. It is safer that way."

Stevens walked over to the china cabinet. On top was another photograph—this one of the whole Lambert family. They were well dressed, prosperous, stood in front of their new brownstone on Manhattan's west side with smiles on their faces. Stevens held the candelabra up to get a better look.

Neil Lambert was tall, blond, and had the unmistakable keenness of a young tycoon in his eyes. Now he was dead. Killed by Peter Downing because he wouldn't sell his crude-rich land claim to Delta Oil. Colette stood next to him, holding his arm, a proud young wife and caring mother—a vision from a way of life Henry Stevens had always envied. He was an orphan. Family life was as strange to him as the dark side of the moon. He looked at her two children. In this photograph, Robert looked about seven and Nicole roughly five. They would be orphans, too, before long, he thought. They would find out just what loneliness was. They would grow up not trusting anyone.

He looked at Colette again. She was, he decided, a woman who would be easy to fall in love with. And a woman Howard Downing wanted dead. *Take as much time as you need. Just find her. She's not going to get away with killing my brother. Here's eight hundred dollars. That should cover expenses. If you need more, send a telegram.* As Stevens gazed at her oval face, he felt he knew her. Yet he had learned through hard experience that it was a mistake to judge anybody by appearance alone. She had brutally stabbed Peter Downing in the back seventeen times.

"Senor," said Rivero, "perhaps we should go. It is dark now and the banditos will soon be in from the jungle."

Stevens ignored the diminutive clerk. Colette's calm eyes mesmerized him. He reached up, wanting to get a better look, and gripped the gilt frame. Something crawled out onto his hand. "What the devil!" He shook his hand and a scorpion fell to the floor.

"Senor Stevens, in South America it is always wise to look before you reach—you never know what you're going to find on an unseen ledge."

Stevens crouched and examined the scorpion. It stood ready to attack, its stinger twitching. Take it as a sign, he thought. She is dangerous. Don't underestimate her. She'll protect her children whatever the cost.

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The rain came down harder now.

Rivero disappeared down the dark street.

Stevens walked across the plaza, tilting his boater forward against the rain, and turned up the town's main boulevard. He passed the post office and the telegraph office, then stopped under the tin awning of the Banco de la Republica.

The day's rates for the American dollar were posted on an outdoor bulletin board. Also posted were land-sale notices, all for oil claims, authorized by the Ministry of the Interior, some going for as little as five hundred dollars U.S.

He continued on until he came to the Royal Dutch Shell Building and stopped in front of its pink colonial facade. He looked at the hotel across the street—the Miramar, where Oscar Quintano had a room.

He crossed the street and went inside.

There was a cantina on the ground floor, crowded with American and European oil workers, and native *campesinos*. No one much noticed Stevens. He worked his way to the back stairs.

He climbed the stairs and walked down the corridor to the room at the end of the hall, where he knocked on the door and waited.

A few moments later, Quintano answered. He was a short, pugnacious man with broad shoulders, a dark complexion, and a thick neck. He looked at Stevens with suspicious, wary eyes.

"Senor Quintano?" said Stevens.

"Si."

"I'm Stevens. Howard Downing sent me."

Quintano stood there, waiting. Stevens reached into his blazer for Howard Downing's letter and handed it to Quintano.

It was instantly apparent that Quintano could not read. He studied the letter upside-down. Finally, he nodded and handed the letter back. "Si," he said. "Si, come in."

The air inside Quintano's room smelled sour. On the table sat a half finished plate of corn cakes and *aji* sauce. The two men sat down and looked at each other.

"You are late," said Quintano, forking a piece of corn cake into his mouth, his eyes sullen. "I was expecting you yesterday."

"We ran into foul weather crossing the Gulf," said Stevens. He folded Howard Downing's letter and put it back in his pocket. Stevens glanced out the window, then put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. He saw that Quintano tolerated his presence only

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grudgingly. "Do you have any idea where she is?" he asked. "Any idea at all?"

Quintano shook his head and put his fork down. "Senor, she disappeared eight nights ago—the night she killed Peter Downing. My men have watched the steamship and railway terminals. She has not been seen. They've watched the road into the interior and they have seen only oil wagons and *campesinos*. They would not miss a woman with two small children. Especially a *gringita*."

"How often does the steamship come?"

"Once every three days," said Quintano. "It comes again tomorrow."

"What about the train?"

"The freight train comes twice a week, the passenger train once a week. Sometimes the passenger train does not come at all."

"Then you think she's still here in Trujillo?"

"She could be nowhere else."

Stevens sat thinking while Quintano continued with his corn cakes. "And where were you the night Senor Downing killed Neil Lambert?" he asked.

"Senor Stevens, I was with Senor Downing—I saw Senor Downing pull the trigger."

"So you saw Senora Lambert then as well."

"The senora was standing on the other side of the courtyard. She watched Peter Downing kill her husband."

"Why didn't Downing kill her then? Didn't he know she was watching? It would have made things a lot easier."

"Downing believed the senora would run," said Quintano. He shook his head and stared out the window for a moment. "He thought she would be so frightened she would take the next boat to Caracas. People in Trujillo do not fight Peter Downing. People do not fight Delta Oil."

"But she decided to fight."

"Si, senor, she did."

"What did she do?"

Quintano took another bite of corn cake and *aji* sauce, washed it down with a gulp of *aquardiente,* and wiped his lips with the back of his arm. "She contacted an official at the Ministry of the Interior office in Maracaibo. A man named Gutierrez. She told him of the illegal land transfer and how officials of the Interior office here in Trujillo had been bribed so Peter Downing could take Neil Lambert's land away. There's an ongoing investigation now. I'm sure Howard

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Downing told you. The Venezuelan assets of Delta Oil have been frozen. The ambassador has been alerted and now there is pending action in the United States. Delta Oil is in big trouble. All because of Colette Lambert. You can understand why Howard Downing is so upset."

Outside, a gust of wind blew a rain squall against the window. This was leaving a bad taste in Stevens' mouth. "And where were you the night Colette Lambert murdered Peter Downing?"

"I was here in my room, Senor Stevens."

"Why was Senor Downing over at Senora Lambert's in the first place?"

"I do not know. Perhaps to warn her. Perhaps to kill her."

Stevens thought for a moment. "What about her maid? Do you know where her maid lives?"

"Her maid lives in San Philipo, the barrio at the crossroads. I have talked to Senora Chavez every day. I have had her mudhut searched. There has not been any sign of Senora Lambert or her two children. Wherever she is, Senor, she has hidden herself well."

Quintano gave him directions to San Philipo.

Stevens hired a guide and donkey outside the Miramar and set off for San Philipo immediately.

He sat on the donkey's back, plodding through the rain. He thought of Doucette. There were only so many excuses you could give a man like Doucette. If Stevens didn't pay up soon, the gangster boss would have him killed. This murder contract was a blessing—it was going to save his life and help get him back on his feet. By the end of the week, he'd be back in Cuba.

Yet it didn't feel like a blessing. What would happen to Colette Lambert's children once he had killed her?

When he got to San Philipo, the rain let up. A lantern burned outside a small thatched-roof church where the devoted gathered for Evening Mass. His *campesino* guide tied the donkey in front of the church and Stevens walked the rest of the way.

Pinta Chavez's mudhut stood next to the jungle. In a small clearing beside the hut, a blackened pot hung from a crude tripod. Stevens reached in his blazer, took out his revolver, and put it in his coat pocket. If he had the chance, he would kill Colette Lambert here.

A rough piece of woven cloth covered the doorway. He saw lamplight burning within. There were no windows and no back door. He pulled the cloth aside, not bothering to announce his arrival.

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An old woman in black and a boy of thirteen or fourteen looked up at him. The boy got to his feet, his shoulders rising. Stevens glanced around the one-room hut. No sign of Colette. No sign of her two children. He looked at the old woman.

"Senora Chavez?"

"Si?"

The woman was too old to help clean, to take care of children, and, glancing at her hands, Henry saw they were crippled by arthritis. The boy was afraid, but ready for a fight.

"Senora Pinta Chavez?" Henry asked again, wanting to verify he had the right woman.

"No," said the woman. "My daughter is at the steamship office. She will be home later."

The steamship office, thought Stevens. The boat came tomorrow. Sometimes a little piece of luck like this made all the difference.

"Who are you?" asked the boy, taking a step forward. "What do you want?"

Stevens' lips parted in his most disarming smile. He had all the information he needed. He just had to get himself out of this now. "I understand Senora Chavez is looking for work," he said. "My wife and I are new in town and we need someone to clean and cook. I was told Senora Chavez might be available."

The boy's defensive posture eased. A smile came to the old woman's face. Both were relieved.

"Si, senor. My daughter just became available last week. If you would care to wait, I'm sure she will be home soon."

"No. I wouldn't want to trouble you, senora. And my wife is expecting me back. But if it is not too much bother, perhaps I can come and see Senora Chavez tomorrow."

"Of course, senor. Whatever you wish."

Stevens went to the steamship office that same night. There were fifteen minutes until closing. He walked to the far side of the office and read the schedules.

The boat from Caracas arrived at six o'clock tomorrow morning and departed at seven-thirty. He hurried to the ticket counter. The clerk, an old thin man with a pencil moustache, his hair oiled back with hair gel, frowned at him. "Senor, if you want a ticket now, you will have to wait until the morning."

"I don't want a ticket," said Stevens. "I want information."

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He took out his wallet and slid a hundred-bolivar note across the counter. The clerk looked at the note, then at Stevens, then pocketed the money, as if such requests for information were a common part of his business.

"What is it you wish to know, senor?"

"I was told there was a woman here earlier. Pinta Chavez. Do you know her?"

The clerk nodded. "Si, senor, she was here."

"And what was her business?"

"She bought passage to the capital on tomorrow's steamship."

"For how many?"

"For three. One adult and two children."

Under normal circumstances, Stevens might have grinned. But he would take no pleasure in killing Colette Lambert. His face remained expressionless.

"*Gracias, senor*," he said. "*Buenos noches.*"

That night in his hotel room, he lay in his narrow lumpy bed staring up at the water-stained ceiling, thinking of the orphanage where he had spent most of his childhood years. A squat white building four stories high with a green roof, an asphalt playground, and an eight-foot chainlink fence. A cheerless place with too many children and not enough staff. Not that he had ever gone hungry, or that they had ever been cruel to him. But there had been something missing. A parent's attention. That's what he would take away from Nicole and Robert tomorrow. He had no choice.

He turned on his side, trying to get more comfortable. He remembered his room, where he had slept with five other boys. He remembered the cheap portrait of the Holy Saviour hanging on the dim green wall and how he would often sit at the window and look across the bleak winter fields to the railway line, waiting for the freight and passenger trains to pass.

He couldn't sleep. He swung his feet out of bed and sat up. They had given him enough clothes to wear, but they had always been somebody else's clothes and were either too big or too small. Not that it ever bothered him. Because he had known that someday he would leave the orphanage, that he would ride one of those trains that passed his window each day, that no one would ever have to look after him again because he would be looking after himself. He stood up, walked over to the closet, and took Colette Lambert's photograph out of his blazer pocket. He could look after himself. A

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sad consolation. He was like an extra piece on a chessboard. No one had known what to do with him.

He lit the kerosene wall lamp and sat down on his bed. That's what your children will be, Colette. Extra pieces no one will know what to do with. He looked at the photograph. Colette Lambert's smile was open and honest, revealing an even row of pretty white teeth. It will be hard to kill you, he thought, but I've always known how to look after myself. He shook his head and let the photograph drop to the floor.

He was at the steamship office early the next day, before six. The sun was up and the sky was clear. He watched the steamship ply the wide muddy river as the jungle glistened in the early-morning heat. The ship's name was the *Magdalena*. The dock hands tied her down and the cargo crew unloaded supplies from the capital.

A covered *terraza* fronted the river behind the steamship office and steps led down to the dock. People got off the boat, mainly oil workers and their families, and the first capital-bound passengers gathered in the *terraza*, waiting to board. Orchids grew in flowerbeds on either side of the *terraza* and their blossoms sparkled with last night's rain.

If she came at all, this was where she would wait. Looking around, Henry saw any number of places to hide. A small jungle-covered hill to the left of the *terraza*. A skid of crates and parcels down in the boarding area. But the long-unused derrick at the end of the dock would allow the best opportunity for escape, and he positioned himself there accordingly.

Colette Lambert came shortly after seven with Nicole and Robert. Because they stood by the *terraza* rail, his line of fire couldn't have been better. He could see them clearly. They looked tired and dirty. She carried two large suitcases. The children carried one smaller piece each. There were tiny tears in her sleeves, made from walking through the brambles of the jungle.

He took out his revolver. He was a good shot. As a rum-runner he had learned to shoot well, even with a weapon as small as this. He peered down the barrel and lined the sights up with Colette Lambert's chest.

He was about to fire when she quickly walked away to ask the ship's purser a few questions. Stevens' lips stiffened.

Nicole Lambert started to cry. She wanted her mother. Colette came back and tried to comfort the girl, kneeling beside her and

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stroking her hair. Nicole continued to cry, a plaintive, tired sobbing from an exhausted little girl.

Colette stood up and descended the few side steps to the flowerbed. A perfect opportunity, thought Stevens. He aimed. What was she doing? She picked an orchid from the garden and climbed back up the steps. Now! Shoot her in the back! But he couldn't squeeze the trigger. His loneliness closed in around him like an old phantom and he watched Colette Lambert give Nicole the blossom. His hand shook. The girl smiled and stopped crying. Stevens couldn't pull the trigger. He drew the gun back and put it in his pocket. He knew how to look after himself, that was one thing he was certain of, but he wasn't going to let those two children grow up with the same sad consolation.

He let them go.

Henry Stevens was meant for better things. He watched them get on the steamship.

Venezuela. He was going to live here now.

Stevens left the derrick and climbed the steps to the *terraza*. Perhaps Doucette would send his goons here to find him. They would have to look hard. He would hide. He would disappear. Like Colette Lambert.

A blast came from the steamship's whistle and the paddle-wheel heaved from aft. The *Magdalena* lurched from the dock and moved into the current. Nicole, Robert, be safe, be happy, grow up in your mother's care. For you, I will hide.

There was a hundred-acre parcel of land posted on the board outside the Banco de la Republica. He would wire Howard Downing for extra money. Can't find Colette Lambert, he would say, need more time, more money.

The steamship curved to starboard and swung round for the journey back to the capital. If he was going to run from Doucette, he might as well run from Downing, too. The steamship's engines roared and black smoke billowed from the stacks. Who knows? He might strike oil. Lots of it. And if and when they came with their carbines, he would—like Colette Lambert—fight them.

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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Holly shook her head. "He'll die there at the Center," she said. "I saw it."

That decided Leila. She'd put her passport in her purse as she was leaving for Heathrow, and even now that act seemed to be some sort of psychic event. "I'm going with you to Paris."

"You can't!" Hastings insisted. "You could endanger yourself as well as Jeffery."

"Couldn't you take me with you?" Leila asked Holly.

"Well, actually I could. The invitation suggested we bring someone along to act as a control during the experiment."

That was all Leila needed. Hastings was still looking worried as she purchased her ticket and walked to the gate with Holly Russell . . .

THE SPY AND THE PSYCHICS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"My name is Holly Russell. I don't know if you remember me." Hastings, who'd been living in retirement on the coast of Scotland for the better part of a year, stood in his doorway staring at the attractive blonde girl who'd rung his bell. She did seem familiar.

"Are you a friend of my niece in Edinburgh?" he asked.

"No. When you were still working, you used me once as part of a study of the effectiveness of psychic espionage."

"Of course!" Hastings responded, remembering now all too well. "Come in, Miss Russell." He ushered her into the living room of his cottage. "I'm not in the habit of entertaining people here. You'll

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have to forgive the dust. My niece usually comes out from Edinburgh once a week to clean for me, but her child has been ill."

"Think nothing of it." She settled down on the couch, an open, friendly young woman he remembered liking during those strange days a decade earlier. She had been in her late teens then, just out of school, and Hastings had chosen her among a dozen people of all ages who had shown evidence of psychic powers. They were brought to London for week-long experiments, in conjunction with the American CIA, to determine if it might be possible for Russian psychics to guess the true positions of MX missiles then being secretly shifted among a series of silos in the American Midwest.

Hastings, a skeptic from the very beginning, had groaned at the amount of time and talent being expended on the project. When the final report was written off as inconclusive, he felt a certain amount of vindication. And now one of these people had brought it all back by appearing on his doorstep this sunny April morning. He wondered what it meant.

"Do you live around here?" he asked Holly.

"I'm still in York. That's not too far."

"Far enough. What brings you here?"

"I had to see you. Remember Mr. Rand who used to work for you?"

"Of course."

"You must warn him. He's in terrible danger."

"Rand's been retired for fifteen years. I haven't seen him in months."

"I have to reach him somehow."

Hastings pursed his lips, studying her. "He lives down in Reading. But—"

"Do you have his phone number?"

"Yes." He started for the desk where he kept his bills and correspondence. "Tell me something. How did you find me?"

"I saw you here," she replied, waving her hand to dismiss it as unimportant. "By the sea."

"You mean in your mind?"

"Yes."

"You still claim to have psychic experiences."

She bristled. "I never claim it. I don't think it's something to brag about. It's more of a sickness."

"Tell me about Rand."

"I've been invited to attend a seminar next week at the European Center for Scientific Anomalies in Paris. They'll be doing ESP exper-

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iments. I must have been thinking about it and I had a sort of vision of Mr. Rand. I barely remembered him because we only met that one time at your office, but I'm sure it was he. He was in Paris, at the same seminar, and I saw him lying on a table with a sheet over his body—all but the head. There was a whole row of bodies, and they had no eyes. They were dead. There was blood on the floor."

When the telephone rang, Leila Rand was busy making notes for the following day's lecture from a thick archeology textbook she used in the course she taught at Reading University. She picked up the phone, thinking it might be her husband calling from Europe, and was surprised to hear Hastings' familiar voice.

"Leila, is Jeffery there?"

"No, he's in Europe. He was doing something for Parkinson a few months back and got involved with the Gypsy refugee problem there. He went back to help with the resettlement of Romanian Gypsies."

"I may need to reach him."

"Where are you? In London?"

"I'm still up in Scotland, but there's a young woman here who has a warning to communicate. I feel a bit foolish, Leila. It may be nothing, but I felt Rand should be told about it."

"What sort of warning?" she asked, feeling a chill.

"The woman's a psychic of sorts. I used her in some experiments when I was still working in London. I don't know that I should say any more on the telephone."

"A psychic? For God's sake, Hastings—"

"I know, I know. But perhaps you should speak with her. We could take an afternoon flight down to London. She's on her way to Paris."

"If you think it's that important—"

"It might be, Leila."

"I could meet you at Heathrow. It's just off the M4, a half hour's drive for me."

"That would help a great deal."

When they'd worked out the time, Leila hung up and sat staring at the window. Poor old Hastings, forced into retirement by the powers at British Intelligence, longed to get back into action. He might be reading more into this than there actually was. But the mention of the psychic had caught her interest. Rand had phoned the previous evening from Vienna to tell her he was journeying to Paris with an old Gypsy woman who claimed to predict the future.

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He was delivering her to the European Center for Scientific Anomalies and then he would be coming home.

Leila had heard about two psychics within twenty-four hours, and somehow that seemed like one too many.

Her first thought upon seeing Hastings emerge from the arrival gate was that he looked remarkably fit—much better than the last time she'd seen him. Perhaps he was adjusting to retirement, after all. "Leila, my dear!" he greeted her, seeming relieved to see her there. "This is Holly Russell."

The blonde young woman accompanying Hastings seemed to be in her late twenties. Leila detected a North of England accent when she spoke. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Rand."

"Let's go somewhere and talk," Leila suggested. There was a coffee shop at one end of the lounge and they found a table there. "Now what's all this about?" she asked when their orders had been taken.

"Your husband is in great danger," Holly told her, and went on to recount her vision of the row of eyeless bodies.

"Where does this take place?"

"In Paris, at the European Center for Scientific Anomalies. I'll be there myself this evening. I only stopped off here to see you."

Hastings must have seen the look of shock that passed over Leila's face. "What is it?" he asked.

"I spoke with Jeffery last night. He's going there today."

"What on earth for?"

"He's escorting an elderly Gypsy woman, then he's coming on home."

Holly shook her head. "He'll die there at the Center—I saw it."

That decided Leila. She'd put her passport in her purse as she was leaving for Heathrow, and now even that act seemed to be some sort of psychic event. "I'm going with you to Paris."

"You can't!" Hastings insisted. "You could endanger yourself as well as Jeffery."

"Couldn't you take me with you?" Leila asked Holly.

"Well, actually I could. The invitation suggested we bring someone along to act as a control during the experiment."

That was all Leila needed. Hastings was still looking worried as she purchased her ticket and walked to the gate with Holly Russell.

The European Center for Scientific Anomalies was located in a turn-of-the-century building with an Art Nouveau facade of twining

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vines and ornamental serpents. Rand gazed up at it as he helped old Hortensia Fernando from the taxi that had brought them from Orly Airport.

"Are we here?" she asked tentatively, leaning heavily on his arm. A stroke she'd suffered the previous summer had affected her right side, leaving her with a pronounced limp and a hand she couldn't use.

"This is it. I'll take you inside and get you settled."

Hortensia, who admitted to being eighty-five years old, was a stout woman who did the best she could with her affliction. She'd worn her most colorful Gypsy garb for the flight from Vienna, and Rand had felt every eye on them as they rode down the airport corridor in an electrically powered vehicle provided for infirm passengers.

It was different here at the Center. Its director, Dr. Marcel Dument, hurried down the staircase to greet them, and he took Hortensia over with a matter-of-fact manner that showed no surprise at her appearance. "Thank you for bringing Hortensia, Mr. Rand. It's been a great help to us."

"I wish I could remain to escort her back to Vienna, but I'm returning to England."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"We're planning some experiments in extrasensory perception and I'd like to use a control group. You'd be perfect for it if you could possibly manage to stay until tomorrow."

"I'd have to phone my wife. She's expecting me tonight." Leila had long ago learned to cope with his unexpected absences, but he didn't want his decision to be too hasty.

"Please stay," Hortensia pleaded. "I'd feel so much better if you were here."

Rand had known the Gypsy woman less than a week, but she'd come to rely on him completely. "Well," he decided, "I suppose I could get an early flight back to London tomorrow."

"Ah, thank you!" she responded, showing gaps where teeth were missing as she smiled.

Marcel Dument took them upstairs and showed them the cell-like rooms they'd be occupying during their stay. "I'm sorry they aren't larger, but we sometimes have twenty-five or thirty people staying here at one time. This group is smaller, but still sizable."

"How many?"

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"Six subjects and six controls, if we can get that many. I have two assistants who work with me, so that makes fifteen in all."

"Is your work funded by the government?" Rand asked.

"In part," Dument explained. "We're loosely affiliated with the Center for Scientific Anomalies Research in Ann Arbor, Michigan, though their experimental methods differ somewhat from ours."

They helped Hortensia to get settled in her room and resumed their conversation as Dument led the way down the hall. "How did you happen to choose this Gypsy woman for your experiment?" Rand asked.

"Gypsy women have traditionally earned money as fortune tellers. When I heard that a large Gypsy resettlement project was under way in Vienna, I contacted them and requested someone they considered a legitimate psychic. Most of them are fakes, of course, we know that, but I felt the Gypsy tribes themselves would know if they had a true psychic in their ranks. The name of Hortensia Fernando was suggested immediately. Of course, her age made travel difficult, but happily for us you were on the scene, Mr. Rand."

"I've been working with them a bit in recent months. It's ironic that many of these nomadic people now want to settle down and are unable to find a place that will accept them. When Romania was a Socialist state, they allowed the Gypsies to remain by the simple expedient of denying their existence. The new government recognized them and has forced many of them back on the road. The story is the same in other countries of Eastern Europe. I met a Gypsy king—the head of a tribe—in Vienna, and he told me a great deal about their plight."

Dument showed Rand his room. It was almost identical to the one Hortensia occupied, with a single narrow window looking out on a rear courtyard. "If everyone else arrives on time, we'd like to conduct the first experiment late this afternoon, before dinner," the Frenchman said.

"That soon?"

Dument smiled slightly. "With some subjects, especially older ones, a full stomach has been known to bring on sleep rather than visions."

Rand nodded. "I'll be ready when you want me."

He spent some time unpacking his small overnight bag and locating the communal bathroom at the end of the long hall. Then, promptly at 5:00 P.M. he was summoned by one of Dument's assis-

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tants, an attractive young woman named Victoria Tempest who told him she'd grown up in Reading.

"That's where my wife and I live," he told her.

"Small world. I haven't seen Reading in a good many years, though."

"Dr. Dument mentioned another assistant. Is he British, too?"

She shook her head. "A young Chinese gentleman. He doesn't speak much English and I have trouble understanding his French, but we manage."

"Are the other subjects all here?"

"Two of them dropped out, but the doctor thinks we can do with ten—five psychics and five controls."

They entered a large living room where the others sat about on sofas and chairs. He was aware of a variety of ages and nationalities, including German and Spanish. Hortensia had arrived on the arm of Dument's Chinese assistant and Rand made his way to her at once. She looked pale and unsteady as the young man guided her to an armchair.

"Are you all right?" Rand asked.

The old woman turned her eyes toward him. "There is someone here that I recognize. I must speak with you after dinner."

Rand nodded and sat down in the only empty chair as Marcel Dument entered the room and conferred quietly with his assistants. They seemed like ordinary people to Rand and only one of them—a vigorous-looking man with a white moustache—could have been over sixty. The others were young or middle-aged. The blonde woman in the corner must have been still in her twenties.

That was when his eyes fell on her companion, seated almost deliberately in the only shadowed area of the large room. It was his wife, Leila.

Dr. Marcel Dument cleared his throat and began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Paris. I believe you all know something about the European Center for Scientific Anomalies and the work we do here. It has been called a psychic-research center, but I believe we have a wider vision than that. This week, however, we are conducting experiments in psychic research. I would like to begin with a basic sort of experiment, a modification of the ganzfeld procedure developed at the Maimonides Medical Center in New York."

There was a slight stir in the room and Rand glanced at the others, his eyes seeking Leila's. She caught his gaze for just an instant, but

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her expression didn't change. Whatever she was doing here, she didn't want him to acknowledge her presence just yet.

"The five of you," Dument continued, indicating the psychics, "will be placed in separate cubicles in a soundproofed, electromagnetically shielded room upstairs. You will be in a comfortable reclining position, as will the five controls in their own separate cubicles. Halved Ping-Pong balls will be placed over your eyes, and diffused light will be projected onto them while unstructured sound is played in your ears. There will be no sensory distractions whatsoever to your receptivity."

The man with the white moustache raised his hand and Dument recognized him. "A question, Mr. Parkman?"

"What will we be attempting to receive?"

The Frenchman smiled and gestured toward his Chinese assistant. "This is Lin Wan." The young man bowed. "He will be our sender this evening. I will select three photographic slides at random, which Miss Tempest will carry to another room. Lin Wan will choose one of the slides without looking at them and project it onto the wall. That is the image he will attempt to convey to you. Each of you, psychics and controls alike, will have a pad and pencil by your hand. The shapes and impressions you record will be compared with the images sent by Lin Wan."

There were a few other technical questions about the mechanics of the experiment, and then the meeting broke up. "We'll meet in Room Fifteen upstairs," Victoria Tempest announced. "Ten minutes!"

Rand started edging toward Leila, but Parkman tugged at his sleeve. "You one of the psychics?"

"No, I'm a control."

"I'm psychic." Parkman's white moustache seemed to bobble as he talked. "I saw a plane crash once two days before it happened. They called me in when that plane was blown up over Scotland, but I couldn't help them. It comes and goes. I don't know how I'll do today."

"I've heard that's often the case." Rand moved away from him. "See you upstairs."

Leila and the blonde woman were just leaving the room when he reached them. He spoke to Leila's companion first. "Don't I know you?"

It was only a gambit in case they were overheard, but she surprised him by responding, "Yes, you do! I'm surprised you remembered."

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"Jeffery—" Leila whispered.

He kept facing the young woman. "But where did we meet?"

"Your life may be in danger," the whisper continued.

"I'm Holly Russell. We met at Mr. Hastings' office once when he was testing my psychic abilities. I was only a teenager then."

Rand had a vague memory of the incident, but he was more interested in Leila's whispered message: "She had a vision of you in a room with dead people. No eyes, blood on the floor. She knew you'd be here, so I came along to warn you!"

"Everybody upstairs," Victoria announced. "We're ready to begin."

"Be careful!" Leila persisted as she followed him up the stairs.

The room was a long one that may have served as a dormitory at one time. Partitions divided it into twelve cubicles, six on each side. There was a cot in each cubicle with a low table next to it. As Rand was helping Hortensia get settled in her cubicle, she told him, "I don't like this. There is an evil person here."

"Who?"

But she had no opportunity to say more. Dr. Dument entered with Victoria and requested that everyone lie down. "I'll be going to the next room to choose three slides at random," he said. "Good luck and good visions to you all."

"Horse feathers!" Mr. Parkman barked in response. "I'm too old to be lying on this thing! How long will it last?"

"Only a half hour," Victoria answered soothingly. She placed the halved Ping-Pong balls over his eyes and adjusted the earphones to bring him a soothing rush of unstructured sound—then visited each of the others in turn. She placed a pencil in Rand's hand and told him, "The pad is right under your hand. Draw whatever image you see." She draped a sheet over him.

"I'm not much of an artist nor a psychic."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I've seen experiments where the controls produced better results than the subjects did."

She left Rand alone, his vision and his hearing both blocked off. He was acutely aware of Leila's warning that his life could be in danger—the young woman with her had seen it in a vision. He tried to relax and empty his mind.

After the first five minutes on her cot, Leila removed the domed coverings from her eyes. A strange red light was playing about the

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room, creating the odd effects of diffused light she'd been seeing. She lifted her head a bit to look for Rand, but she could only see into the cubicle directly across from her where Mr. Parkman seemed to be drawing something with the pencil.

Cautiously, she removed the headphones and slipped off the cot. The men and women were covered with sheets, as in Holly's vision, and the eye coverings gave the impression that they were sightless. She knew Jeffery was in danger and she had to reach him before the blood on the floor became a reality, too.

Mr. Parkman was still drawing, as were a couple of the others. She moved down the line past Holly Russell and saw Jeffery opposite the old Gypsy woman he'd escorted there. She stepped closer to see if he was all right and suddenly his hand flew up to grab hers. "Jeffery—it's me!" she gasped.

He pulled the coverings from his eyes. "You warned me to be on my guard. It's a wonder I didn't break your wrist." He sat up on the cot, keeping his voice low. "What's going on?"

"People drawing pictures. No blood on the floor yet."

"Perhaps you should return to your cot. Our brain waves might be ruining the experiment."

She turned away and started back, then gave a low gasp. "Jeffery! The Gypsy woman! There's blood—"

He was off the cot in an instant, following her to the cubicle on the opposite side, next to the one occupied by Mr. Parkman. The pencil was lying loosely in Hortensia's limp right hand, over the pad on which she'd drawn a few vertical lines. There were drops of blood on the floor from a wound in her neck.

"She's dead," Rand said. "We'd better call off the experiment."

Marcel Dument was the first one into the room. The other subjects, disturbed by the sound of voices, had removed their eye coverings and earphones and were getting off the cots. Dument looked around in panic, and Rand feared for a moment he might actually burst into tears. "What's all this noise?" he demanded. "You've ruined the entire experiment! Lin Wan is unable to transmit!"

"Hortensia Fernando has a worse problem," Rand told him. "She's been murdered."

"Here? Impossible!"

"Look for yourself. She was stabbed in the neck with a thin-bladed weapon, possibly a letter-opener. The wound caused very little external bleeding, but it was enough to kill her within minutes. The

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killer may have held a hand over her mouth to prevent any sound."

"You seem to know a great deal about it," Dr. Dument said with a frown.

Victoria and Lin Wan were in the room now, too, demanding to know what was happening. The remaining subjects were in various states of hysteria, including Holly Russell. "It's like my vision!" she almost screamed. "The dead body, the people without eyes, the blood on the floor! Oh, God, I saw it all!"

"Only you had the wrong victim," Leila reminded her.

"You'd better summon the police," Rand told Victoria Tempest. "Then we'll see what we've got here."

"Police?" Mr. Parkman protested. "I have a reputation to protect."

"No one is accusing you of a thing," Dument assured him. "Let's go someplace where we can talk." He turned to Victoria. "Bring along all the subjects—both psychics and controls. We'll go downstairs to the sitting room."

Rand had an idea. "I think it might be a good idea if I collect all the pads and label them. When you have a murder committed among psychics, someone might have caught onto an odd brainwave."

Leila stayed with him as he collected the pads, helping him write the name of each person on the back. "Some of these are pretty wild," she observed. "Others are blank."

"Like mine."

"Mine, too. I was busy watching over you."

"Yet you saw no one else off their cot?"

"No. But I played the game for the first five minutes—that would have been long enough for the killer. Did Hortensia receive anything?"

He glanced at the vertical lines on the pad. "She'd only just begun, but she seemed to be receiving something. Poor woman. Not a good way to die."

"You seemed to know a great deal about her throat wound."

"It was one of several silent killing methods taught by the KGB before the Soviets changed their ways."

They headed downstairs to join the others. "You think there's a rogue agent among the subjects?" Leila said.

"I don't know. Hortensia told me she recognized someone here, but she didn't say who."

Dument was holding forth in the living room as he had earlier. "The police will be here shortly," he told the nine remaining sub-

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jects. "It seems certain that Hortensia Fernando was murdered by one of you in the room with her."

"I object to that conclusion," Parkman sputtered. "What about you and your two assistants?"

"I can assure you I had nothing to do with it. Why would I ruin my own experiment? As for Victoria, after I randomly chose the three slides, she took them into Lin Wan's room. She remained with him while he projected one on the wall and concentrated on it. And in the event you think the two of them were in it together, I need only point out to you that three of the ten subjects did indeed intercept his thought waves with some degree of success."

"Which three?" Rand asked. He hadn't paid that much attention when he had picked up the pads and labeled them.

"Here's the slide Lin Wan chose. It's a forest view showing a number of tall trees. Holly Russell was the closest. She received a positive vision of a tree. Mr. Parkman appears to have drawn several mushrooms, but in outline they bear some resemblance to trees. The victim, Hortensia, drew three vertical lines before she was killed. These could have been the beginnings of trees. You'll note that none of the others is even close, and two pads—those of Mr. Rand and Miss Gaad—are blank."

Rand smiled slightly to hear Leila's maiden name. She hadn't used it in years. Before he could say anything else, they were interrupted by the arrival of the police.

Between the police questioning and the tension that had rapidly built among them all, hardly anyone in Marcel Dument's big house had thought much about eating dinner. It was after nine before the official investigators departed, having arranged for further questioning in the morning. The body of Hortensia Fernando was removed and Rand stood at the foot of the stairs as she was carried down on a covered stretcher. It was a tragedy to end up like this after a lifetime of wandering. A senseless death—senseless, at least, to everyone but her killer.

Later, grouped once more around the tables in the living room trying to eat from the selection of food Lin Wan and Victoria had provided from the kitchen, signs of their impatience began to appear. "I'm not staying in this house overnight with a killer," Parkman decided. "I'd be safer sleeping under one of the bridges on the Left Bank!"

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"The police say we all must remain until morning," Dument reminded him. "If you leave, they'll think you have something to hide. They'll come after you."

A dowdy woman Rand didn't know joined in, trying to dissuade him. The argument continued until Parkman weakened and agreed to stay the night. "But I'll be gone tomorrow," he assured them, "just as soon as I talk with the police."

While the others argued and went over the afternoon's events once more, Rand studied the three drawings that had been on Parkman's, Holly's, and the dead woman's pads. "What do you think?" Leila asked, coming over to sit by him.

"Holly's is the closest to the scene Lin Wan was concentrating on. I don't really believe in ESP or any of these things, but there are times when even a skeptic has to bend a bit. Tell me exactly how you happened to be here with her."

Leila ran over the story again, starting with the phone call from Hastings and his arrival with Holly at Heathrow. "It might be," Rand mused, talking to himself.

"What might be?"

"I have an idea that might work, but first I want to call Hastings. I'd better do that right now."

He left Leila with the others and asked Victoria Tempest if he could use the Center's phone to call Scotland. "I suppose it would be all right," she agreed, leading him out to the office.

Once he was alone, he placed the call to Hastings' retirement cottage on the Scottish shore. He hoped Hastings wouldn't be in bed yet, though certainly the man had wakened Rand many times when he was his superior in British Intelligence.

"Rand!" Hastings greeted him. "Where are you? Is everything all right?"

"I'm still in Paris. Leila is here, as you know, with that young woman psychic. We're all fine for the moment, but there's been a killing. The old Gypsy woman, Hortensia Fernando. She told me earlier that she recognized someone at this Center. That person may have killed her."

"Is there any way I can help?"

"Leila tells me Holly Russell remembers me from a time about ten years ago when you ran a test trying to determine whether psychics could pick out the underground silos where American ICBM missiles were hidden."

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"That's right. The results were inconclusive. Some subjects scored well, but not much better than chance would have it. Others did poorly. We worked with the CIA on it."

"Holly did well?"

"I believe so, yes. How accurate was her vision about you?"

"I'm still alive but otherwise I'd rate her about seventy-five percent. She also did well during the experiment here, though it had to be terminated because of the killing. Look, Hastings, what I need from you are answers to a few questions."

"Go ahead."

"Were there any Gypsies in the group you tested a decade ago?"

"No, I'm sure I would have remembered that." He hesitated a moment. "There was something about Gypsies, though, not long before my retirement. Let me see—"

Rand waited.

"No, it's gone. If it comes to me and seems important I could let you know."

"Think, Hastings! Did it have to do with Paris?"

"Not Paris. It was in East Berlin, just before the wall came down in '89. Someone was trying to escape disguised as a Gypsy and a real Gypsy band betrayed the person. I can't remember now whether it was a man or a woman, or the person's nationality. It was just a story I heard—someone who'd been an agent of the East Germans and had to get out fast before their allegiance was revealed. You'll remember that virtually all the files of the East German secret police fell into the hands of the West."

In his younger days Hastings would never have forgotten the important details, but Rand didn't press him further. He didn't need to.

When he finished his conversation with Hastings and returned to the others, Leila looked up inquiringly, but when he spoke he addressed Dr. Dument. "If everyone isn't too tired, I believe there's a way that we can determine who killed Hortensia Fernando."

"And what would that be, Mr. Rand?"

"These three drawings tell it all. Of the people you assembled for your experiment, it's obvious that Holly Russell is the most adept at psychic powers. If she were to sit in the cubicle where the Gypsy woman died, I think she could conjure up a vision of the murder and identify the murderer for us."

Everyone turned to look at the blonde girl, who blushed. "I don't know if I could do that—"

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"If she could see it now," Parkman argued, "why couldn't she see it when it was happening?"

"Because her mind was focused elsewhere—on the picture Lin Wan was trying to transmit. Remember that the killing must have taken place during the first five minutes of the experiment."

Dument and Victoria exchanged glances. "I see no harm in it," she decided, "as long as everyone's present to see the results—provided there are any. Lin Wan?"

The Chinese assistant nodded. "It could be interesting. The police of various countries have had some success in the use of psychics for crime investigations and missing-persons searches."

"What would you want me to do?" Holly asked.

"Simply sit in the cubicle, or lie on the cot, and concentrate your thoughts on Hortensia," Dument told her.

"All right," Parkman said, getting to his feet. "Let's do it." Somehow he'd become the unelected leader of the others and they all followed his move. The dowdy woman, the fat German, and the Spaniard all moved in his wake toward the stairs.

Rand let Leila walk along with Lin Wan while he and Holly Russell brought up the rear, during which time he had a few private words with her.

They finally decided that Holly should lie on the same cot that Hortensia had occupied when she was stabbed. "It would be perfect if she had the murder weapon," Dument said, "but no weapon's been found." He bent over the young blonde woman and asked, "Would you like your eyes covered?"

"It might help me to concentrate."

When she was in the cubicle alone, Rand, Leila, and the other subjects arranged themselves in a semicircle outside and Dument, Lin Wan, and Victoria grouped in one corner. "Please concentrate," Dument said soothingly. "Let your mind go blank."

Holly's body seemed to tense and then relax. At that moment she was probably the only one in the room who *was* relaxed. Parkman started to mutter something, but Leila hushed him.

"Do you see it?" Marcel Dument asked softly.

There was silence for a full minute before she responded. "Yes, I see it." Her voice had taken on a different quality.

"Tell us what you see."

"I'm on a cot in this cubicle and someone has come in to be with me. My eyes are covered but I hear a voice, soothing me."

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"Then what happens?"

"I feel—" A gasp, a little cry. "My neck! A sharp pain! I can't breathe! Someone's covered my mouth to muffle the sound. I—I'm dying!"

"Did you recognize the voice of the person who stabbed you?"

"Yes."

"Whose voice was it? Who stabbed you, Hortensia?"

Holly's body seemed to convulse at the mention of the Gypsy woman's name. "I—I—"

"Who?"

Rand stepped suddenly forward. "Don't be afraid. Tell us who stabbed you."

Dument tried to hush him, but already Holly was speaking. "It was Victoria Tempest. She killed me!"

Victoria's hand came up holding the slim dagger, but she wasn't fast enough. Leila grabbed her by the arm and toppled her to the floor.

The police came again, and once more Rand found himself in the living room with the others. They'd been so in awe of Holly Russell's psychic abilities that she hated to tell them it had been part of a plan to smoke out the killer and get Victoria to reveal herself. "My abilities come and go," she said. "I could never perform on command like that without a little help. Mr. Rand told me what to say."

"But—" Dr. Dument was baffled along with the others "—Victoria and Lin Wan were the only two people here who *couldn't* have committed the murder. They were together all the time. Are you saying he was part of it, too?"

"No, she was in it alone."

"How could you know it was her? Perhaps you're a better psychic than Miss Russell."

"There was nothing psychic about it. Those drawings told the whole story, especially the three vertical lines drawn on Hortensia's pad. You see, it was by her right hand, but she'd lost the use of that hand after a stroke last year. I knew from the beginning she hadn't drawn the lines, they had to have been drawn by her killer. But why? Well, what did the lines establish?"

"The time of death," Leila said.

"Exactly! The beginning of the drawing made it appear that Hortensia had to be still alive when Lin Wan looked at the slide and began the experiment. From that moment on, Victoria was with

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him and they alibied each other. But once I realized Hortensia's pad had been by the wrong hand, Victoria had to be the killer. Hortensia would have corrected her on the pad placement if she was alive. Victoria killed her upon first entering the cubicle, smothering any cries, and then placed the pad by her right hand without giving it a second thought."

But Dument had an objection. "If Victoria drew those three vertical lines, she was drawing the suggestion of the trees before that slide was even chosen."

"Think about it," Rand replied. "There were no trees, or even mushrooms such as Mr. Parkman drew. Only vertical lines. Almost any slide chosen, except for a horizon or seascape, would have some vertical lines in it. Even a group of people could be indicated by such lines. You chose three slides at random and handed them to Victoria. As she carried them into Lin Wan's separate room, she glanced at them and picked the one that best suggested the lines—in this case, a forest. Then she forced it on Lin Wan in the same manner that magicians force someone to choose a card from a deck. Or perhaps she actually removed any inappropriate slides and replaced them with ones of her own. In any event, she made certain that Lin Wan was concentrating on a picture whose vertical lines somewhat matched those she'd drawn on her victim's pad."

"Why?" Holly asked. "Why did she kill her?"

"I don't have the whole story clear, but I believe she worked for the East Germans before the Berlin wall came down. Hortensia saw her once when she tried to escape disguised as a Gypsy, and Victoria killed her to keep her past from being revealed. Hastings put me onto that when I phoned him. We'll have to check the records."

It was some time later when Leila asked him, "Holly Russell did see it. She saw that room and a murder. She warned Hastings and me, and we got to you with the information. How do you explain that?"

"I don't try to," Rand replied. "As Holly herself said, her abilities come and go. If governments could rely on true psychics, it would probably put all the spies out of business."

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another distinguished reprint by

JOHN le CARRÉ

In the 50th Anniversary Issue earlier this year, we reprinted one of two stories by John le Carré that appeared in the Saturday Evening Post *in the late Sixties. Here is the second of the two by the author of* The Spy Who Came In From the Cold, The Looking-Glass War, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, The Honourable Schoolboy, Smiley's People, The Little Drummer Girl, The Russia House, *and most recently* The Secret Pilgrim.

Writing of The Little Drummer Girl *in* New York *magazine when it was first published, Reginald Hill said, "It's been clear for some time that le Carré wants to be taken seriously as a novelist. His claim is undeniable now, but just in case anyone still equates seriousness with dullness, I will add that none of the pleasures you'd expect from a thriller—pace, violent action, shock, suspense—is missing from this . . ."*

WHAT RITUAL IS BEING OBSERVED TONIGHT?

by JOHN le CARRÉ

I was not, in my youth, fortunate with women. They found me either cold and wary, or overattentive. They cast me, I had the impression, midway between Cardinal Richelieu and an Italian headwaiter. The psychiatrists may have their sport with me, but my predicament was simple: I wanted women and won them seldom.

My needs were never more pressing, or more painfully frustrated, than in the little Provençal town of Étrouille-sur-Mer, in the year 1954. The date is relevant. For the people of Étrouille-sur-Mer, 1954 was an *annus mirabilis*. In the preceding year their small and nor-

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mally unrewarding vineyards, which hitherto had produced only a thin and disagreeable rouge known throughout Provence as *le pipi d'Étrouille*, yielded a truly remarkable growth. The grapes were bursting and erect, and the vines, known everywhere for their frail and inhibited appearance, for once held their rich burden sturdily. Étrouille-sur-Mer, barren for a decade, had borne Bacchus a child of delight.

As for her inhabitants, filled to the brim with the new wine, their own skins swelled and colored as had the skin of their grapes; their eyes sparkled like the light in their vats; and none was more positively affected than my own Marie-Louise, the principal attraction at her parents' inn, the Auberge du Domaine, where I myself, as a student awaiting admission to Oxford, had accepted service—need I say it?—as a waiter.

I will not say I loved her; I *desired* her. At night I lay awake, constructing fine phrases, devising opportunities, hotly dreaming of her rich hips and thighs, her plump lips and dancing breasts; I stripped her, kissed, caressed, and amazed her, all in my imagination; but by day I was cumbersome and ineffectual and inwardly agonized. I watched her as I cleared away the empty glasses, I watched her as she lowered her black fringed eyes at the brown peasants from the vineyards, who lusted for her matter-of-factly with clean, outdoor, uninhibited gazes, and I hated her, as the jealous do, for the small favors she occasionally granted me. A kiss, a dance, a squeeze of the hand, even a consoling, playful pat upon the backside. What were these but sweetmeats handed to a child while the adults glutted themselves on stronger fare? Even the carafe of new wine that she occasionally left in my room or the small keepsakes she brought me from town when she rode with the peasants to the market were nothing but salt in the wound.

Now and then, I had no doubt, she had a certain maternal affection for the English boy who skulked so incongruously at the edge of her carefree life. But I did not want a mother—I wanted a mistress—and to my aching, envious heart, these moments of generosity were no more than the salute of a wanton girl to the life she had left behind. I was convinced that in all of Étrouille I was the one man who had not enjoyed her charms. How she tantalized me!

I remember still how at night, when we had swept away the last debris, counted the money, set the chairs upon the tables, and sprinkled wet sawdust on the wooden floor, she would take my hand and lead me upstairs, past her parents' door and into my room, where

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she would sit on the bed with a small, wistful sigh, and—still without relinquishing my hand—shake her head so that her hair fluttered like silk curtains over her face.

"Poor boy! You want me so much," she would say, as if lust were a condition to be pitied in a person so far removed from the easy, primitive way of life. And then she would jump up angrily, toss her head, and rifle through my books and papers.

"It is interesting?" she would ask in English. "It interests you?" I could speak French to anyone but her. "Tell me, please, about the world of the mind." I forget what answer I gave, but inwardly I knew only one: "Marie-Louise, Marie-Louise, the mind has no meaning if it is not implanted in the flesh!"

I was even sorry for her then, sorry for the emptiness that awaited her when her ripe body was past its year. And lifting my glass to her departing footsteps, I drank from the carafe she had brought me, drank the rich fruit of last year's miraculous vintage, drank until I fell asleep, promising myself that one day, when the turbulence of Marie-Louise's youth had worn itself out and the *pipi d'Étrouille* was once more equal to its pathetic reputation, I would return, rich and wise and forgiving, to care for the twilight of her life, though she had scorned the dawn of mine.

It had a curious flavor, that great wine, even when it was new; it is with me still as I write. I know nothing of wine in a general way—the cult bores me—but the wine of Étrouille, harvested in 1953 and first enjoyed (prematurely) in 1954, is like the one tune in the memory of a deaf man. At first taste, it promised but withheld itself; it lay trembling upon the tongue, begging the reassurance of a kindly palate; this granted, it gently responded, and suddenly the ecstasy was upon you. A strange but brilliant odor filled the nostrils and infused the palate; the liquid swelled and broke upon the senses; and then, at last, but slowly, the taste faded, leaving behind the perfect languor of a protracted afterglow. I did not by any means wholly enjoy it, for we do not always view kindly that which stirs us from our apathy or lulls us away from our desires, but I could no more forget it than I could my first conquest in the field of love.

They named it la Cuvée Marie-Louise after the girl they had all adored. The outside world saw little of it. Only a few bottles, they say, found their way to the table of the connoisseur. The lion's share remained in Étrouille and was quickly consumed by greedy natives before it even had time to mature. Go there today and demand la Cuvée '53 and they will reverently bring you a dusty bottle with a

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fine label of fake parchment. The year will be right, the indications impeccable, the price exorbitant. There will even be a small ticket attached by lead wire to the neck, and there you may read, in French and American, of the year God sent nectar to the valley. But the wine itself is execrable: it is the old *pipi* in fancy dress.

I left Étrouille in the following winter, a few thousand francs the richer. I had nowhere in particular to go—my tutors would not accept me yet—but I could not endure the thought of living in Marie-Louise's presence a second time while the valley woke to the fertilities of spring.

I took one job with the post office in St. Albans, and another with a large store in Watford. Sometimes I wrote to Marie-Louise; sometimes she wrote to me. Once she sent me a rather pathetic parcel. It was my birthday, I suppose, for she was always sentimental about birthdays. There had not been a peasant in Étrouille whose birthday she had not remembered with a free bottle of la Cuvée. She sent me a tin of homemade pastries—they were salted things that she made herself and served free to regular customers—but they had crumbled during the journey and all that was left was a sort of cheesy shrapnel that I fed to the swans at Bushey. A week after Christmas I received a terse note from the customs office, advising me that two bottles of dutiable wine had been sent to me from Étrouille-sur-Mer. But, like the biscuits, they had arrived broken. I wrote and thanked her all the same, but the letter was returned to me by her mother.

Marie-Louise had waited for me for almost a year, her mother wrote, and surely that was long enough for any girl? She had eloped with a schoolmaster of no fortune or prospects, a Lyonnais quite incapable of making her happy. Her father was furious, her mother said, and would have no part of it; the schoolmaster was a prig, he had declared, and, worst of all, a non-drinker, he came from a family of notorious teetotalers. The child, in her father's frank opinion, had thrown herself away. Her mother, finally, was extremely apologetic, but, she said, I must understand that young girls these days cannot wait forever; Marie-Louise, though she had never broken faith with me, was of an age when she needed a man. She had always dreamed of marrying a schoolmaster, an academic; she was a passionate reader and at school she had taken first place; though she had the instincts of a woman, her first ambition had always been in the spiritual direction.

I could bear no more. I tore the letter in pieces and withdrew, a broken man, to the bachelor seclusion of an Oxford college. I worked

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like a madman. The more the memory of Marie-Louise oppressed me, the more furiously I fought it away with ruthless intellectual disciplines. Only once did I allow myself the pleasures of the senses, and the result was a disaster.

Under heavy pressure from my colleagues, I agreed to attend some wretched celebratory dinner. Our master of ceremonies, charged with arranging the menu, served a particularly foul rouge, overpriced at twenty-two shillings, too thin to be taken for anything but a rosé, and distributed under the title of Merveille d'Étrouille. Even my colleagues found it undrinkable. The master of ceremonies, who was an idiot, refused to apologize. He had consulted authorities, he explained, who spoke of the Étrouille crops with the deepest respect; in 1953 the southern vineyards of Étrouille had produced a wine—

Later, having railed at him, they threw him in the pond, and I, having given them every assistance, returned to my studies.

I suppose, in fact, that I owe my success in the examination to my poor Marie-Louise. The thought of her in the arms of her mean and cheerless academic drove me again and again to my desk. It was no longer the Cuvée Marie-Louise that lulled me into giddy sleep, but the ashen dullness of Kantian dialectic, the observation of minds in flight from the flesh. Yet at heart I was not deceived by these stern philosophies. I had no taste for the disembodied mind; the abstractions of German philosophic verbalism were, for me, like musical scores that would never be played. Thus, though I took high honors and was offered a fellowship, I entered the gates of the academic life as a prisoner. At least Marie-Louise, I thought, had she but, known, would have been proud of me. I was not proud of myself.

The academic reputation of the provincial French university at Félon, near Avignon, was in those days, heaven knows, not exactly high. But academics, like the rest of the world, find their stars in strange places, and it was at Félon that they discovered Du Chêne. All of a sudden, in the tiny world to which I now belonged, Du Chêne had become the arbiter of intellectual fashion.

It is not much, I know, but the fact remains: from Uppsala to Berkeley, there was not a Germanist who ventured into print on the subject of the Nineteenth Century thinkers without reckoning with the judgment of Du Chêne. At the smallest leap into unfounded speculation, his pen struck like a whip, for he was not merely our star, he was our abbot and the scourge of all untidy thinking. It was with uncommon pride, therefore, that I accepted his invitation to

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address the faculty of Félon. Not only had Du Chêne been gracious enough on a number of occasions to give favorable notice to my work, but the University of Félon was famous for its hospitality.

Du Chêne and I shared, I liked to think, a mutual regard. He had written warmly of my reappraisal of Schiller's interpretation of the naive; I had been much excited by his observations on the inductive nature of Kant's logic. But his invitation, extended in the name of his colleagues, overwhelmed me with its generosity. "Your diligence," I read, "your perseverance in the noble search for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment—" It was a citation. I replied the same morning. I would be proud, I said, to address the faculty, and delighted to attend a dinner afterward in my honor. The same afternoon I made a special journey to Low's in Hatton Garden. I bought an Eighteenth Century bonbon dish for the professor's wife; the professor should know that I did not take his invitation lightly.

To my delight, Du Chêne was to meet me at the station. I know precisely how I expected him to look: massive and oaklike, an aristocrat as vigorous and austere as his writings. I imagined a generous man, but one who was stern, who strode firmly, but not (since he admired me) uncharitably, across the earth. I dressed him in a suit of dark grey, clean but rubbed shiny at the elbows by the rich teak of an ancient rolltop desk, and I fancied a large and cumbersome motorcar parked in a privileged place, with a loyal driver waiting at the wheel.

When the freckled clerk in the English blazer approached me at the station, a grubby Bon Marché shopping bag dangling from his left hand, I assumed that Du Chêne had been detained for reasons of state and had sent his acolyte instead.

"Du Chêne," he said, hissing, while his upper lip rose in a sneer. I did not realize at first that he was introducing himself; I thought he was making an apology on behalf of his absent master and that Du Chêne was the subject of an unfinished sentence. But he had taken my hand in his by then and was feeling the flesh as though he disapproved of it. We had a couple of hours to kill, he explained, before my lecture. Had I eaten on the train or would I care for a sandwich?

It occurred to me, as I listened to his unbroken monologue in the dingy bar where we drank our coffee, that Du Chêne's ideas were not ideas at all but attitudes of scorn conveyed by a sharp but barren mind. Where previously I had thought of him as breaking new ground, I now understood he had been merely retracing old paths

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and beating down the bushes to either side. I tried to remember what he had praised in my own work, and I realized for the first time that he had only sided with me where I had questioned the work of others; and I wondered how on earth I had been taken in by him, and how his colleagues—who were now to form the nucleus of my audience—could tolerate the dictatorship of such a shallow, bitter, and ungenerous intellect. I was soon to know the answer.

Du Chêne himself had decided to introduce me.

There are two methods, in my experience, of introducing an outside speaker. I think of them as the English and the German styles. The English method requires a pipe, for the speech must be largely inaudible, and the introducer sits not on the podium but in the first or second row of the audience. When the hall is about three quarters full, and long before the majority has sat down, he rises, but does not hold himself erect, and, with his back to the speaker and his hand to his pipe, growls out a couple of flat sentences that are at once drowned by the clatter of feet and the grinding of chairs. If the speaker strains his ears, he may just catch his own name mispronounced, and that is all, but his best course is to ignore the whole procedure, for by that means he starts even with his audience.

The second, or German, method has been practiced in the field of literature by Bernard Shaw. Having no confidence in what is to follow, the introducer takes it upon himself to offset the deficiencies in advance. He offers conclusions to what has not yet been said, questions nonexistent hypotheses, and even—I have known it done—takes personal exception to certain dark inferences that could mar the speaker's objectivity. It was this method, predictably, that Du Chêne had selected.

We would all be familiar, he said, with the rich contribution that our guest had made to his chosen field of study. Du Chêne himself had had occasion to be grateful for several stimulating suggestions. He referred in particular to my paper on the Schillerian distinction between the naive and the sentimental. Personally—the upper lip trembled—Du Chêne was inclined to question whether Schiller was a philosopher at all. He had noticed, in his recent readings, that the literati tended to speak of Schiller as a philosopher, while the philosophers spoke of him as a poet.

It was while he was making this tired joke that I woke to the reaction of the audience. It was one of unmixed loathing. They followed him as racegoers might follow an unpopular winner, longing

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for him to fall, yet knowing there was little hope. Some had lowered their heads and were staring miserably at their hands; some had turned their eyes glumly to the high, dusty windows, but God was hidden behind a black and stormy sky that day, and they had no comfort there. A few—they were the younger men whose nerve perhaps was stronger and whose aspirations had not yet died—these few stared at him with passion burning in their Gallic gaze, each one a Cassius to this precocious, usurping Caesar, and I knew they hated me also as his protege.

Du Chêne must have been nearly finished, for he was talking now of my own person. We all looked forward, he said, to the privilege of a closer acquaintance at the faculty dinner tonight; it was not often that they had the pleasure of receiving a *gentleman of Oxford* in their midst. Speaking for himself, Du Chêne said, he had a warm affection for Oxford: he had spent a term at St. Peter's Hall while still a student. *In vino veritas*, he had learned, was the Oxford motto; it was a nice thought for those of us who enjoyed the pleasures of the table—the upper lip made it clear that he was not among them—that today an Oxford man was supplying the truth, and that Félon was supplying the wine.

I spoke appallingly. I skipped, at random, long pages of eulogy of Du Chêne, and the whole fabric of my thesis collapsed. I extemporized and could not find the words; I made awful jokes and no one laughed; I apologized and no one pitied me. I spoke of the great French institutions of learning, of hands clasped across the Channel, but all I felt was the smoldering hostility of an alienated audience. And all the while, through the mist, Du Chêne's gleaming eyes shone on me like prison lights from which there was no refuge.

I think that, in a way, they actually quite liked me. They had expected a destructive robot of Du Chêne's own school. Instead, they had watched me fail, and fail royally. The apprentice had disgraced his master; the day was not wholly the enemy's. When it was over, they shook my hand quite kindly.

An older man—I had seen him earlier appealing to God—actually patted my arm. He had gained much from my lecture, he said; it had been a very *human* lecture. Humanity, these days—here a small glance in the direction of Du Chêne—was often in rather short supply at Félon, particularly among the *young*. But tonight, he added with a parting smile, tonight they would do justice to my humanity. "We bring our wives," he explained, quoting John Gay to me:

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" 'There is nothing unbends the mind like them.' " He was an Anglicist, I learned later, with a gift for apt quotation.

They had taken a private dining room at the inn where I was staying. The French windows gave onto a courtyard planted with trees. The branches had been trained over a pergola and the lamps shone downward through the leaves. I was reminded, a little sadly, of Étrouille.

Alone in the dining room, I waited for my hosts to arrive. Du Chêne had gone home to collect his wife, and I knew at once that I would be facing him down the length of the table, for while every other place was set with a cluster of wineglasses Du Chêne's was provided only with a clouded, drab-looking tumbler that I am sure the maître d'hotel had chosen personally as an emblem of his contempt.

I remained there sadly, listening for the first car to arrive. A waiter had entered, quite a young man, a student perhaps, filling in time before beginning his studies. He smiled at me pleasantly and offered me an apéritif. I was enjoying my stay? I was enjoying it very much, I replied, and I might have added, if I had not heard a car drawing up in the courtyard, that I envied his estate and wished to heaven I had never renounced it in favor of the hollow triumphs of an academic discipline.

I composed myself suitably, waiting for the door to open. It is a silly game one plays at such moments of nervousness. Should one be turned expectantly to the doorway or allow oneself to be discovered unawares? Hands clasped before one, or behind? It was the Du Chênes. I actually caught a few words as he settled with the taxi driver. A month ago, he was saying, the fare had been four francs sixty—now it was four francs eighty. The driver answered wearily: they were held up at the lights; the meter was controlled by a combination of time and distance; he could not be responsible for the meter. I heard the rustle of crinoline and a light, feminine step, and I saw in my mind's eye the pinched, sallow wife he would have, the mother-of-pearl handbag and the poor raincoat covering the black crepe, and I was in the act of thanking God that I had not parted with the silver bonbon basket when Marie-Louise walked in on the arm of Du Chêne, her black hair brushed over her lovely shoulders and her eyes turned down so that I knew that she expected me.

Du Chêne introduced us. I touched her hand, reaching toward her tentatively, like a blind man. She gripped me as if I would save her from drowning.

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"Pierre has spoken constantly of you, Monsieur," she murmured. "I do not understand all, but I admire you immensely."

"Our work goes far over her head," Du Chêne remarked indifferently. "But for some reason she has always been interested in your writing. Your style is very simple."

Du Chêne turned his back on Marie-Louise in order to present to me another guest, who mercifully had just entered. Soon they were arriving in numbers, their faces bright with gastronomic anticipation. Rich smells reached them from the hallway; they greeted me with pleasure, recognizing, I am sure, the light of humanity and the dash of color that now redeemed my features. Somewhere I heard music playing, though Marie-Louise has since assured me there was none. But a man who is on the edge of paradise hears his own sounds, and no one, not even Marie-Louise, has the right to dispute them.

There were eighteen of us at table. Marie-Louise sat on my left. She sat very demurely, talking most of the time to the elderly Anglicist, unbending his mind and almost unhinging mine, for her foot was resting against my ankle and our hands had intertwined beneath the immaculate tablecloth. She was more beautiful than ever—and more assured. I read her afresh, and I read her accurately, with an eye sharpened by love and a mind improved by years of agonized reflection. She was lost, but not forfeit, disappointed but not despairing. She had made a mistake and had seen where it could lead, and she proposed to rectify it at the earliest opportunity. Her very body was a body in waiting. I was certain she had quickly determined not to waste it on Du Chêne. She had had a lover — several —and some no doubt (it was in the air) were at this very table, but the lovers were to cover the mistake she had made six years ago, and now she faced a clear sea and meant to sail her own course. There was no flirtation between us; the pact was concluded with that first handshake. Our relationship was resumed where it had left off, but it was informed with the wisdom of the intervening years. We were lovers before the act, and the act—as our secret caresses now declared—would be taken care of at the earliest possible opportunity.

There are cliches about both the art of love and the art of cooking that I have never subscribed to. The French delight in them less than we suppose, but they are victims of their reputation. Still, there are probably those who could recite to this day the list of superb dishes that were put before us. And Marie-Louise, in any event, is

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in a special position to do so, since it was she, the hostess, who had ordered them.

We ate and talked and drank, each with greater liberality as the evening proceeded. I have never been so entertaining. I made jokes, and the jokes were funny. I regaled them with small gossip from my arid Common Room, and they laughed out loud, rejoicing in my frankness. I even chose a moment to criticize my own lecture of that afternoon. I had thought about it too much, I said, I had been overawed by the honor of the occasion—but they would hear no wrong of me, shouted me down, lifting their glasses to me and assuring me that every word I spoke had been a jewel of wisdom. Opposite me, at the far end of the table, already out of focus, Du Chêne sipped darkly at his tumbler, forgotten or ignored.

Who spoke first of producing a special wine? Marie-Louise assures me to this day that it was the old Anglicist on her left, but if that is so, then Marie-Louise implanted the notion in his mind. The movement began with a conference from which I was excluded. A muddle of excited murmurs at the center of the table, a short dispute followed by universal agreement, and the waiter, the young waiter whom I had spoken to earlier, was summoned and addressed in terms near to reverence.

The bottles should be decanted, they said; they should be uncorked now and allowed to breathe; no, they should be uncorked later. It was Marie-Louise who quelled the dispute. *This* wine, she said simply, should be drunk directly from the bottle and uncorked only at the last minute. The waiter returned with a colleague. The bottles they carried were wrapped in linen napkins. Silence descended on the company. Only Du Chêne, sensing an irregularity, his rimless spectacles glittering unpleasantly in the candlelight, chose to speak:

"What ritual, may I ask, is being observed tonight?"

Not a head turned. It was the Anglicist who finally replied:

"We are making a bridge," he explained. (I think he was holding Marie-Louise's other hand, for I felt a surge of warmth for him that was like an electric reaction.) "A bridge between the naive and the sentimental. Between the intellect and the body."

"More like a river," Du Chêne retorted sullenly, regarding the little row of white-clad bottles that stood like virgins before their First Communion, but the day was undoubtedly the old professor's and had been from the beginning.

"And since your guest," the professor continued, "*our* guest, has taught us that life is not only to be contemplated but enjoyed, we

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propose to ask him"—here he glanced at Marie-Louise as if she were at least party to the notion—"to ask our guest to sample a wine we have chosen in his honor, and to give us the advantage of his valued academic judgment."

I protested, but only feebly. I was no connoisseur, I said, but again they shouted me down. All my reserve had left me. I am no musician, but if they had put a grand piano before me that night I could have played them a Beethoven sonata with the confidence of a master.

The young waiter's hand trembled a little as he poured. He had put before me a new glass of the classic balloon shape and the whole table watched in silent rapture as the red wine spread like a stain over the broad base.

The glass had not reached my lips before I heard the raucous chatter of the peasants in the bistro below my bedroom. I smelled the wet, sweet scent of the vine leaves on the southern slope of the valley and heard the cracked, irreverent chime of the little chapel, summoning the heathen Gauls to worship some other God but Bacchus; I saw Marie-Louise lean back a little in her chair, as she had lain so vainly on my little bed. At last I drank. The liquid swelled on my tongue, its aroma infused my nostrils, turned my head.

For a moment I feared I had lost altogether the power of speech, for not even the great Cuvée could wash away the lump in my throat or keep back the tears that crowded my heated eyes. My first words, I think, were inaudible to all but those closest to me:

"It is the finest of all French wines. I thought it was lost to us forever. A wine as rare and as rich as happiness itself, of multiple and mysterious tastes, a wine of the mind and of the body. It was found once only." My voice gathered strength. "For those of us at this table, it will not be found again in our lifetime—a gift of God to a barren valley." I named it, but not at once, for I had Du Chêne in mind. Even in that moment of ecstasy, with Marie-Louise's hand resting coolly on my thigh, cunning was my ally. The year was 'fifty-three, I said, the wine was first enjoyed (prematurely) in 'fifty-four. The valley was remote and even despised by those who thought they had experienced the best that Provence could yield.

They were applauding, but I barely heard them. Someone was clapping me on the back, someone else was embracing me, but I saw only Marie-Louise, and the sweet tears running down her cheeks.

Du Chêne had made it a rule to retire at eleven. He liked to rise early, he explained in a metallic voice, in order to arrange his correspondence. I thanked him for his generosity. No, I said, I would

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make my own way to the station—he had done enough for me already. The Anglicist promised to bring Marie-Louise home; she was, after all, the hostess and obliged to remain—and when Du Chêne had left, she gave him a little kiss that he seemed to understand.

We took the midnight train to Étrouille, changing at Avignon. I have altered the name, for we do not care for visitors in the valley. There are a few dozen bottles left in the cellar of the Auberge du Domaine, and we like to use them sparingly. The bonbon dish sits resplendent on our dining table. Marie-Louise fills it from time to time with savory pastries of her own manufacture. The quality of the Cuvée Marie-Louise has, if anything, improved. Not even its most ardent admirers had dared to expect such a maturity in the flavor. The afterglow is particularly rewarding.

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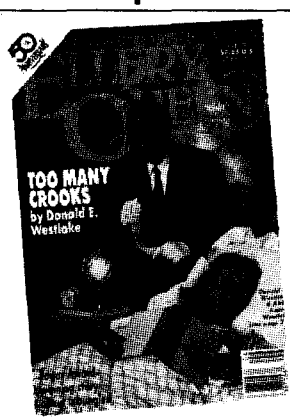

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ISSUE #588—DEDICATED TO CLARK HOWARD

Clark Howard has been a constant favorite with our readers since be began publishing in these pages 11 years ago. Since then he's been a frequent nominee and recipient of our annual Readers Award and MWA's Edgar Awards in the best short story and best fact-crime book categories. His concerns are for the outcast, the minority, the prisoner—and he has woven these concerns into some of the most exciting short fiction being written today. Stories like "Horn Man," "Puerto Rican Blues," "Animals," "Scalplock," "The Color of Death," "The Dakar Run," and "Challenge the Widow-Maker," are examples of his modern classics.

In an interview we published in 1981, the author had this to say about his beginnings: "I was born in Tennessee in 1934. My father was 'Tennessee Slim' Howard, a bootlegger in business with George Barnes, who later became 'Machine Gun' Kelly. My father was sent to federal prison and my mother took me to Chicago. She overdosed on drugs and died, and I became a ward of Cook County. I lived in foster homes until I was twelve . . . and was a chronic runaway. I was finally put in reform school as an incorrigible. My maternal grandmother got me out two years later and had me sent back to Tennessee. I was still a bad kid, so my grandmother agreed to sign falsified papers so I could join the Marine Corps. I enlisted just before my seventeenth birthday and I literally grew up in the Corps. Many of my personal values, my neatness, my ability to organize, my self-confidence, were all learned in the Corps. It was my family and my teacher during some very important years.

"Back in Chicago, when I was 20 and out of the Marines, I got a night job switching freight cars for the railroad, and enrolled at Northwestern University on the G.I. Bill, taking journalism and creative writing. I became disenchanted with formal education though and began writing based on my own experience."

His fiction novels include The Killings, Dirt Rich, Quicksilver *and most recently* Hard City *(Dutton). His non-fiction books include* Six Against the Rock, Zebra, Brothers in Blood *and he is currently researching a new work of fact-crime, tentatively titled* Love's Blood . . .

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DARK CONCEPTION

by CLARK HOWARD

The Lear jet was over Trenton when the co-pilot came out of the cockpit and said, "We've just been advised that Linden Airport is shut down, Dr. Faracy. The entire area from Perth Amboy up to Orange has suffered severe flood damage. We're being diverted to Teterboro Airport, just east of Passaic."

Curt Faracy looked up from his seat, frowning. "How far is that from the prison?"

"About thirty-five miles, Doctor. But I don't think you'll be able to get there tonight. The roads that haven't been washed out have been closed by the state police. Even the New Jersey Turnpike is closed."

Faracy looked across the aisle at a grey-aluminum briefcase securely buckled to the opposite seat. His eyebrows pulled together more tightly as his frown deepened. "Get Dr. Bygraves on the radio for me, please."

What now? he wondered. There would be no problem with the male test subjects, of course. The six convicts at Rahway Prison weren't going anywhere. As for the six female test subjects, they were safely in a motel near the prison, chaperoned by a dozen Federal marshals. Everything for the experiment at that end was go. The only problem, he thought, looking at the briefcase again, was *that*.

Turning his head, he tried to look out the bulkhead window. All he could see was blackness, with his own reflection in front of it. Curt Faracy was thirty-six but looked older. Long hours in various laboratories, hunched over endless microscopes, specimens, and formulas, eating meals out of vending machines, drinking black coffee to keep alert, never getting enough sleep, never allowing his mind to slow down and rest, had all served to age him, or at least appear to. On top of it all, he had an ulcer.

"We have Dr. Bygraves, sir," the co-pilot advised, handing Faracy a telephone handset with an accordion cord extending to the cockpit.

"Dr. Bygraves?"

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"Yes, Curt."

"Are you aware of our problem here?"

"Yes. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do to help you at the moment, Curt. We've checked with Teterboro Airport, and once you land you'll have to stay down—they won't be putting anything into the air until the storm's over. We thought about having a helicopter pick you up, but even low-altitude aircraft are grounded. I'm afraid you're going to have to hole up somewhere, at least for the night."

Faracy expelled a silent breath. "I'm not crazy about that idea," he said, glancing at the briefcase again. "What's the prognosis on the storm?"

"Clearing in twelve hours," Bygraves said. "The specimen you're carrying to Rahway was secured late this afternoon, wasn't it?"

"Yes. We pulled it out at four-ten P.M."

"Our laboratory fade rate has been about twenty hours, if I recall. I don't think I'd want to go with anything past about sixteen hours on this first experiment. What do you think?"

"I agree," said Faracy. "Anything past sixteen would greatly reduce the chances of a healthy embryo."

"Getting the specimen in some ice will slow the fade, of course. But even with ice, that puts us under a time limit of ten past eight in the morning. You'd have to be at the prison by, say, seven-thirty."

"At the latest. And the subjects would have to be ready. We couldn't have any delay."

A silence fell between them as they both pondered the exigencies of the situation. This first experiment was crucial—it would be the basis for everything to come in the future. Therefore, it was essential that it be conducted under the most optimum conditions.

Faracy broke the silence with a weary sigh, and said, "I guess there's no other choice. I'll find a motel near the airport."

"I'd rather you went on into New York," Bygraves said. "The George Washington Bridge is still open to eastbound traffic. Try to get down to midtown Manhattan to the Hilton. We'll make arrangements from here. I'll feel a lot better knowing you have twenty-four-hour room service instead of having to depend on a motel ice machine. Order a bottle of champagne—you can put the specimen in the ice bucket." He laughed. "I'll even let you drink the champagne."

"You're all heart. Okay, the Hilton it is."

"Give me a ring when you get settled in."

Faracy heard a click as Bygraves cut off . . .

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Despite almost zero visibility, the Lear touched down at Teterboro without incident and was able to taxi onto a sheltered parking pad. With the aluminum briefcase clutched securely in one hand, his garment bag in the other, Faracy hurried into the little terminal.

"Any transportation available into Manhattan?" he asked the night-operations supervisor.

"Nope," the supervisor replied. "The local taxis and buses are all out helping evacuate flood victims from Passaic. There's nothing left around here but airport emergency vehicles."

Faracy removed a fifty-dollar bill from his wallet. "I really do want to get into Manhattan," he said.

The supervisor locked eyes with him briefly. Then he palmed the bill and turned to one of his clerks. "Tim, get out the pickup truck. I want you to run this gentleman across the river."

Interstate 95 was open to eastbound traffic all the way to the George Washington Bridge. The clerk, Tim, drove carefully through the heavy rain, while Faracy, holding the aluminum briefcase on his lap, peered out, trying to see the flood damage. Mostly all he could see were a few stalled cars and the hazy red or yellow lights of emergency vehicles. The nearer they got to the Hudson River, where the land culverts and drainage systems were emptying, the better everything looked. Only the radio, reporting the evacuation of Teaneck, Hackensack, and sections of Paterson, reminded them of the disaster that lay behind them.

Once across the George Washington Bridge, the rest of the trip was easy. Manhattan, draining into the East River as well as the Hudson, had little more than puddle accumulation. Tim drove down the Henry Hudson Parkway. At 57th Street he cut over to the Avenue of the Americas and moments later let Faracy out under the Hilton's big canopy at 53rd.

Dr. Bygraves' office had called to arrange a reservation, so all Faracy had to do was sign in at the desk and he was shown directly to his room.

The first thing he did, after placing the briefcase safely in the middle of the bed, was call room service. "This is Dr. Faracy in sixteen-twelve. I'd like dinner sent up, please. A sirloin, medium-well. No potato. Salad with bleu cheese. And a bottle of G. H. Mumm's Extra Dry."

While he waited for dinner, he called Bygraves in Washington again.

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"All settled in?" the older doctor asked.

"Yes. I'm in sixteen-twelve. I just called down for dinner—and a bottle of Mumm's. Just for the ice bucket, you understand."

"Of course." Bygraves paused as if considering something, then said, "Your lady friend called. Said she had expected to hear from you before now. I told her you'd been diverted and would call her later." He paused again, then asked, "She doesn't know anything about the experiment, does she, Curt?"

"Certainly not. I'm surprised you'd even ask, Arnold." Faracy's tone had a hint of irritation in it.

"I'm sorry," Bygraves amended at once. "It's just that we're into such delicate and dangerous terrain here. God knows what the press would do if they got hold of it. And you and Miss Goddard have become rather close over the past year."

"Lila Goddard and I have an understanding about the confidential nature of my work," Faracy said. "She knows I'll tell her what I can, when I can. And she's much too good a television anchorwoman to try and pressure half a story now when she knows she'll get all of it in good time. Don't worry about any leaks from this quarter."

"All right. I'm sorry, Curt. This storm thing has got me on edge. Are you in for the night?"

"Definitely. Already got my shoes off."

Bygraves sighed heavily. "Well, get some rest then. I'll call you at four in the morning and we'll plan from there."

"Right. Good night."

The room-service waiter arrived, set up his table, and opened and poured the champagne. Faracy wrote a tip on the check and signed it. As soon as the waiter left, Faracy removed the bottle of Mumm's from the ice bucket and set it aside. Spreading a towel on the bed, he set the bucket next to the aluminum briefcase. Working a six-digit combination, he unlocked the case and carefully opened it.

The inside of the aluminum case was lined with canvas-covered lightweight lead similar to the protective aprons worn by X-ray technicians. Lying in the bottom of the case, held in place by two elastic bands, was a bag made of the same material. About the size and shape of a newsmagazine, it had a Velcro flap that closed at the top. Next to the bag was an ominous-looking pair of black gloves, also made of the pliable, lightweight, canvas-covered lead.

Faracy put on the gloves and carefully removed and unsealed the black bag. With one gloved hand, he slowly drew out a cylindrical

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glass container by a three-inch metal rod extending from one end. The object looked for all the world like some space-age popsicle. The rod and both ends of the cylinder were silver metal; between the two ends it was half-inch-thick glass. Inside the cylinder, running its length, was a hollow shaft no larger in circumference than a dime. In the shaft was an aqueous substance of some kind—thick, viscid, glutinous, giving off a faint yellow incandescence. It moved and surged within the tube as if it had life.

Carefully removing the cylinder from the lead bag, Faracy turned it upside down, holding it by the rod, and slowly submerged it in the bucket of ice.

Taking the towel, he spread it on the luggage rack in the corner and set the bucket on it. Later, when the ice melted, he would call down for a fresh bucket.

Very hungry, Faracy sat at the room-service table to eat. Starting his dinner with a long swallow of champagne, he pulled the phone over and called Lila Goddard at her television studio in Washington. She answered after one ring.

"Good evening, Miss," he said. "This is an obscene phone call."

"Curt! Where on earth are you?"

"In the New York Hilton, sipping Mumm's Extra Dry. And how I wish you were here."

"Me, too. How'd you wind up at the New York Hilton?"

"The storm put us down at a little airport just across the river. I'm going to wait out the weather here and try to make it to my destination in the morning."

"That mysterious destination you can't tell me about? I think it's just a ploy to get away from me for a few days."

"That'll be the day."

"When will you be back?"

"I planned to be back tomorrow night—now it'll probably be the next."

"Damn."

"My sentiments exactly."

They talked about trivial things for a couple of minutes and then Faracy said, "Listen, honey, I'm going to have to catch a few hours' sleep. I'll try to call you tomorrow night."

"All right," Lila said.

After a moment she added, "Whatever you're doing, Curt, please be careful."

"I will. Goodnight, sweetheart . . ."

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As he ate the rest of his meal, Faracy thought of Lila Goddard and how much he loved her. She was the first woman since his divorce from Margaret eight years earlier that he really felt something for. And the fact that it was *Lila Goddard* still amazed him.

Like thousands of other Washingtonians and surrounding residents, Faracy had been watching newswoman Lila Goddard for three years, ever since she moved up from Miami to anchor the local evening news. Thickly redheaded and creamily complexioned, she was a slim, long-legged wonder who quickly became a Washington favorite because of her penetrating news sense and an ability to see things in a story that older, more experienced, mostly male newspersons missed. A captivating smile when the story was light, the proper seriousness when it wasn't, a smashing wardrobe that made Barbara Walters look tacky, a wink for the men, a firm stand on the side of the women, and a seemingly sincere fondness of children (whom she secretly loathed), Lila was the undisputed queen of Washington news. She received more news leads and managed to get more exclusives than any three other locals. Her salary had quadrupled since coming to Washington, and there was a rumor that ABC was seriously considering her to co-anchor a restructured *World News Tonight.*

Curt Faracy had met Lila when she did a television news special on the DSS, the Department of Scientific Studies, where Faracy worked. Dr. Bygraves, the director, had assigned Faracy to be Lila's official guide, translator, and door-opener. Faracy, a brilliant *summa cum laude* biologist, was high on the list to become the next director of DSS when Arnold Bygraves retired.

Lila, who had come to their scientific complex near the Naval Research Laboratory prepared to expose some gross waste of taxpayer dollars on useless experiments, was immediately charmed, then fascinated, then found herself lustfully distracted by Curt Faracy. This somewhat plain, clean-cut, totally frank man was able to translate the most involved scientific studies into simple language that she—and her viewers—could understand.

And he turned out to be the most honest man she had ever met. Faracy candidly admitted that DSS conducted some asinine studies, such as why post-office ballpoint pens always leaked, but he also pointed out that such work was necessary to please certain politicians on certain budget committees, thereby assuring the DSS the necessary funds to continue sustaining more important ongoing studies in genetics, hereditary variations, mechanisms and phenom-

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ena of organisms, and other areas of health by which they hoped to prolong and improve human life.

After three days with Curt Faracy, Lila came away with a glowing report that ultimately was aired nationally and introduced the American public to DSS for the first time. The show was an intelligent, very interesting look inside one of the government's little-known departments, and overnight catapulted DSS into a Capitol Hill favorite. There would be no problem, Director Bygraves was assured from certain quarters, in obtaining future allocation increases. Just keep up the splendid work.

To celebrate the high rating of the show when it aired, Lila invited Curt to dinner. It was her way of thanking him, she said, for all the help he had given her. She asked him to call for her at her Georgetown apartment at nine. They would have a drink, then go for a late supper at Renata's, her favorite Italian restaurant. Later, if he was interested, she would give him an uncrowded, late-night tour of the television studios where she worked.

The evening didn't turn out the way Lila planned—but it was perfect nevertheless. Fifteen minutes after Curt arrived at her apartment, before finishing a first drink, they were undressing each other. It had been, they both reflected later, absolute carnal madness.

Now, after a year, it was the same. Not as urgent, but every bit as passionate. They had long since lost count of the suppers they had missed, the social engagements they had failed to show up for, the invitations they had turned down, the concert and theater seats they had left empty. Aside from their jobs, nothing mattered to them except the hours they managed to be together.

In the hotel room now, thinking of her, Faracy wished again that she was with him. He needed to unwind, to shift into neutral and for a little while forget his assignment, the experiment, the metal-and-glass vial submerged in the ice bucket. Faracy's work had taken a heavy toll on him in the six months since serious activity on the current project began. It wasn't unusual for him to spend fourteen hours a day in the lab, not eating properly, keeping his energy up with pills.

Lila had noticed it after only a month. "You're not looking so good, Doc," she told him one night. "What's with the long hours?"

"Research," he said vaguely, "in a new area. It always takes more time when the ground is brand-new."

"I wish you'd lighten up a little."

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"I will," he'd promised.

But he hadn't.

Two months later, matters were worse. "Curt, what in the hell is going on?" she finally demanded. "You're working yourself into an early grave."

"*It's an important project—*" *he began, but she wouldn't let him* finish.

"Don't give me that again! It can't be more important than your health! Curt, go look at yourself in a mirror. You're starting to resemble Count Dracula on a sunny afternoon."

"I know. I know, really," he placated, "but there's a time factor involved. We're dealing with a substance that might have a limited span of usefulness. We have to do the work within a natural time frame dictated by what we're working with." He sighed quietly. "It's very complicated, Lila."

"Can you tell me what it's all about?"

Faracy had shaken his head. "I would if I could, but the project is highly confidential. It's not that I don't trust you—it simply wouldn't be ethical to discuss it, nor fair to the others involved who are expected to maintain group integrity. It's kind of like your own confidential news sources. I wouldn't ask you to divulge the identity of one of those."

"*Touche,*" Lila said. "Okay, my scientific friend. I just hope you don't work yourself to death." She had snuggled in his arms. "I wouldn't want to lose you, Doc."

"I'll be all right," he promised. "As soon as the project's completed, I'm taking that month's vacation we talked about. We'll go away somewhere if you can get time off."

"I'll *take* time off. Where will we go?"

"Antibes. San Remo. Portofino."

"Sounds wonderful."

"In the meantime, let me do what's necessary. Don't nag me about the long hours. Let's just enjoy each other when we're together. You're the only relief I get from this thing."

Since that talk, Lila had been the perfect helpmate. Not only did she not nag him, but she took pains to make their evenings, however short they were, perfect for him. Good suppers, which she prepared herself so they wouldn't have to go out; vitamins, which she insisted he take; relaxing music; massages; slow, gentle sex with her doing most of the ministering; and, above all, no further questions.

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Finishing his meal and a third glass of champagne, Faracy realized how very tired he was. All he needed, he thought, to guarantee a few hours of restful sleep was a hot, steamy shower. Setting his glass on the room-service table, he went into the bathroom, unbuttoning his shirt on the way. Turning on the water and adjusting the temperature to as hot as he thought he could stand it, he started the shower.

While Faracy was in the shower, there was a soft knock at his room door. He didn't hear it. When there was no response to the knock, the door was unlocked and the room-service waiter entered. Seeing that the meal he had delivered earlier had been eaten, he folded the tablecloth over the dirty dishes, dropped down the side wings of the table, and pushed it into the hall.

On the way out the door, he picked up the ice bucket.

When he got back down to the kitchen, the room-service waiter stopped just inside the door and set the ice bucket on a corner shelf with a dozen identical buckets not being used. He didn't empty it, as he was supposed to, but left it three-quarters filled with crushed ice, then continued onto the dishwashing sinks where he parked the portable table and left it for a busboy to strip.

He went back to the room-service station to wait for his next assignment. On the way, he passed a main-dining-room waiter, Ramon Sedillo, coming in from the gourmet restaurant. Sedillo paused at the wine steward's alcove. "Table twelve wants a bottle of 1976 Pouilly Fouisse," Sedillo said.

"Okay, set up the ice bucket," the wine steward instructed.

"Yes, sir." Sedillo headed toward the corner where the ice buckets were kept. A tall, fairly handsome Puerto Rican who had just passed his thirtieth birthday, he had an easy charm, a quick smile, and was a habitual liar. On the way to the ice buckets, he encountered another waiter named Ordonez and grabbed his arm.

"Hey, man, listen, I need a little favor," he said. "I got a date at eleven-thirty and the captain just put two guys at one of my tables for late supper. If they stay too long, can you cover for me?"

"Who you got a date with?" Ordonez wanted to know. He squinted at Sedillo through thick eyeglasses. "That little dancer at the Club San Juan?"

"Yeah—Candida."

"You promised to fix me up with one of the dancers there," Ordonez complained, "and you never did. I ain't doing you no favors, man."

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He started to walk away and Ramon grabbed his arm again. "Wait a minute, don't be like that. I been working on somebody for you," he said, his mind going automatically into its lying mode. "But it takes time, man—those girls at the Club San Juan are classy foxes, you know?"

Ordonez pulled a sour face. "Classy? They're topless dancers! What's classy about that?"

"Ice bucket, Ramon!" the wine steward called.

"Coming up!" Ramon shouted back. Then to Ordonez: "You don't understand. I know what they *do* ain't classy. But the girls themselves, they got class, man. Now you take Candida, for instance. Her old man left her. She's got a kid to raise, but she wants to better herself so she goes to beautician school in Queens. She dances at the San Juan to pay her way. I mean, she's trying to improve herself—that's class."

Ordonez looked skeptical behind his thick glasses. "Well, what about the one you're working on for me? What kinda class has she got?"

"I ain't got time to tell you about her right now," Ramon said, glancing toward the wine steward's alcove. "Just gimme a couple more nights and it'll be all set for you."

"Couple more nights is all? No bull?"

"Word of honor, bro."

Ordonez was unconvinced.

"Okay, but you better not be messing me around, Ramon."

"Never," Ramon swore. "Listen, I gotta get that ice bucket."

He hurried over to the corner. There was a bucket in front with ice already in it, so he took that one. Rushing back past the wine steward with it, he smiled and said, "Sorry, sir. I had to wait for the machine to crush some ice."

He went quickly into the dining room and set the bucket next to table twelve.

"Your wine is coming right up, gentlemen," he said to the two men at the table. "The wine steward brought up the wrong kind and I had to send it back. It'll be just a moment."

Ramon lied as naturally as he breathed. In the space of five minutes, he had lied to his co-worker Ordonez, to the wine steward, and to the two men at table twelve. He went back into the kitchen, smiling, thinking of Candida and the lies he would tell her on their date tonight . . .

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"I don't know about you," said one of the men at table twelve, "but for my money one of the best things they showed us this year was that transmission van that relays audio and video signals to distribution networks. I'm really excited about that piece of equipment."

"I reckon you would be," his dinner partner replied. "If I had the Los Angeles and Las Vegas regions, with all the closed-circuit shows that originate from out there, I'd be excited, too. But I don't think poor little old Memphis and the mid-South market is going to impact much business on that sophisticated transmission van. That's for rich people's entertainment. Us folks down in Memphis is poor."

The two men at table twelve wore business suits and had clipped to their breast pockets blue-plastic name badges bearing a lightning-bolt logo and the name NORCOM. They were regional sales managers, in New York for an electronics-communications trade show. Both had been temporarily stranded by the suspension of air traffic in the area brought on by the storm.

"Another thing that I liked," said the first man, whose name was Rod Prater, "was that video-text system that hooks into a person's TV set and allows it to pull up local information at the touch of a button. Can you imagine just having to turn on your TV to see what's playing at the downtown movie houses, or to look at a dinner menu for a particular restaurant, or see what's on sale at a local department store or supermarket? I think that unit is going to be a real winner."

"Sure," said the man from Memphis, whose name was Bill Pete Joiner. "Again, that's fine for you, out there amongst all those movie stars and gambling millionaires who can afford to buy every new electronic plaything that comes along. But, hell, Rod, that thing won't sell to the average customer. Charley Bluecollar don't care what's playing at the movies or what they're serving at no restaurant, because he don't go out no more—alls he does is sit at home with his ESPN 24-hour sports channel on, his fist around a beer can, and whatever kind of supper his old lady puts on the TV tray."

"I think you're wrong, B.P.," said Prater. "I think video-text'll one day be as common in the average home as cable TV's already become. It won't just be an information service—it'll be an order taker, a bill payer, an appointment maker."

"Affluent options," Joiner scoffed. "The average Joe don't make *appointments*. He don't go nowhere but the barber shop, the hardware store, and the gas station." When Joiner talked, he deliberately used poor English to cast himself as a good old boy. He called it part

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of his sales persona. In truth, he had an engineering degree from Vanderbilt and could have conversed in perfect English if he wanted to.

"Did you see anything at *all* this trip that you think would go over well down in poor, impoverished Memphis?" Rod Prater asked drily.

"Just that blonde sales rep from Motorola," Bill Pete Joiner told him with a leer.

Their waiter, who had introduced himself as Ramon, returned with their Pouilly Fouisse 1976, the label of which he showed to Rod Prater, who had ordered it. "Fine," said Prater, and Ramon proceeded to open the bottle. He put the cork next to Prater's plate and poured an ounce for him to sample. Prater, who knew wine as well as he knew electronics, didn't bother to taste it—he merely sniffed the bouquet, nodded, and again said, "Fine."

Ramon poured. The two businessmen reached for their glasses and Rod Prater, raising his, said with a smile, "To a year of record sales—even in Memphis."

"I'll drink to *that,* by God," Bill Pete seconded.

As they simultaneously drank, both noticed Ramon having difficulty putting the open bottle into the ice bucket.

" 'Matter, boy, won't it fit?" Bill Pete asked, winking at his companion.

Ramon, frowning, reached just under the surface of the ice and withdrew an unusual-shaped glass-and-metal object, which was completely frosted over. "What the hell?" he said. Then, "Excuse my language, gentlemen."

"What is it?" Prater asked, looking at it curiously.

Ramon, holding it by the stem, shrugged.

"Looks like an old-fashioned television tube on a popsicle stick," said Bill Pete Joiner.

"Let's see it," said Prater, reaching across the table.

Ramon handed it to him.

Curt Faracy could feel sweat making the back of his neck clammy. Along with the head chef and the room-service supervisor, he had just finished looking in the dozen or so ice buckets in the corner of the kitchen. They were all empty.

"If it isn't here," Faracy said, "where else could it be? Is it possible it was sent up to another room?"

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"No, sir," the room-service supervisor replied. "You were the last one to have wine with a room-service order tonight."

"Perhaps it's being washed," the head chef suggested. "Let's check the sinks." He led them deeper into the big kitchen.

Even though the kitchen was very warm, Faracy was beginning to feel chilled from sweating. He was wearing only his trousers, shirt, and shoes. No underwear or socks, no coat. He'd been so shocked to find the ice bucket missing when he came out of the shower that he'd thrown on the minimum clothing necessary, grabbed his room key, and hurried down the hall, hoping to catch the room-service waiter before he left the floor. When he located the service elevator, he saw that it wasn't in use. The indicator showed the car to be on the first floor. Faracy pushed the Down button and the indicator began to move.

Riding down in the service elevator, he tried to force himself to be calm, but he couldn't. Normally a very practical man, in an extreme situation he'd first ask himself one question: What's the worst that can happen? Once he had determined that, and accepted it, he found that he was able to deal with complications much more intelligently and calmly. It was remarkable how many crises were reduced to simple problems in the face of personal composure.

All right, he asked himself now, what's the worst that can happen? This time it was the wrong thing to do. The enormity of what was known that could happen, along with the terrible dread of what was unknown, actually made him momentarily ill.

The goddamn thing just has to be touched. That's all. Just touched!

As soon as he stepped out of the service elevator into the kitchen, the head chef came over to him. "Sir, this area is for employees only."

Faracy had quickly drawn him aside and spoken very confidentially and urgently to him. "I'm a guest in the hotel. Dr. Faracy in sixteen-ten. I design medical equipment. Earlier tonight I was working on a small metal design in my room, something to be used in laboratory work. I put it in one of your ice buckets to cool the metal and I'm afraid the room-service waiter took the bucket away. Could you possibly help me locate it?"

The head chef had summoned the room-service supervisor and the two men had led Faracy to the corner where the ice buckets were kept. The bucket from Faracy's room wasn't there—or at least what had been *in* the bucket wasn't there.

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"What did you say it was again, sir?" the room-service supervisor asked as they walked toward the dishwashing sinks. "A metal sculpture, did you say?"

"Metal-and-glass, actually," said Faracy. "Just a small piece, about six inches long, as big around as a quarter. I'd been polishing it and wanted to cool it down afterward."

Faracy was surprised at the facility with which he was telling the lie. He was making up the story with the aptitude of a confidence man.

At the dishwashing sinks, all three men quickly saw that the ice bucket wasn't there. There were only a few dinner dishes on the sideboard. The room-service supervisor questioned the man at the dishwasher. He said he hadn't washed an ice bucket all evening.

While they were at the sinks, the maitre d' came in from the dining room. When he saw Faracy, he asked the head chef what was wrong. The head chef explained the situation.

"Has anyone thought to check out on the floor?" the maitre d' asked.

No one had.

The maitre d' led Faracy to the set of doors—one in, one out—that connected the kitchen to the dining room. They stepped through the proper door into a partitioned service area from which they could observe the entire restaurant. "There's one at table eighteen," the maitre d' said, pointing, "and one at table nine, one at table twelve—"

Faracy's eyes had already locked onto a table at which two men in business suits sat, and at which a waiter stood. One of the men was holding the specimen container and handing it to the other man. Swallowing drily, he brushed past the maitre d' and headed for the table. As he crossed the room, he watched the second man at the table turn the specimen container over a couple of times, shrug, and pass it back to the first man.

Goddamn! thought Faracy. Should he shout across the room at them, yell for the man holding it to drop it? It wouldn't do much good, he reasoned at once: both of them had already handled it. Probably the waiter, too. As he was thinking it, the man at the table proved him right by shrugging as his companion had done and handing the container to the waiter. Faracy walked a little faster, wondering why there was no faint yellow glow coming from the container. Then he realized that the glass was probably iced up enough to conceal it.

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He got to the table just as the waiter returned the specimen container to the ice bucket and said, "I'll get you another ice bucket, gentlemen."

"Excuse me," said Faracy. "I'm sorry for the intrusion. That odd-looking object you've been examining is a piece of metal-and-glass sculpture that belongs to me. I had a bottle of wine with dinner in my room earlier this evening and I used the ice bucket to cool the piece down after I polished it. The waiter removed the bucket while I was in the shower. I hope it hasn't created a problem for you."

"Well, it certainly has," said Bill Pete Joiner, winking at his associate again. "We haven't been able to keep our wine chilled."

"I'll be happy to buy you another bottle," said Faracy.

"Don't pay any attention to him," said Rod Prater, "he's pulling your leg. Actually, we're glad you showed up—none of us could figure out what the hell it was."

Faracy turned to the maitre d', who had followed him to the table. "Would you mind sending for another ice bucket for these gentlemen and letting me take this one back to my room? If I take the piece out of the ice again, it may harm it."

"I'll be happy to, sir." The maitre d' nodded at Ramon to act on the request.

Faracy picked the bucket off the stand and turned back to the table. He was still smiling, but behind the smile was being put into gear the ninety-six-point-four-percent memory retention he had developed over the years. "Again, my apology, gentlemen," he said as his eyes flicked from one name badge to the other. NORCOM, whatever that was. B. P. Joiner. Rod Prater. "Are you certain I can't buy you a fresh bottle of wine?"

"Forget it," said Prater. "Glad you found your work of art—or whatever it is."

Faracy and the maitre d' returned to the service area, where Ramon was just coming out with a fresh bucket of ice. After he passed, Faracy said, "I'd like to send down a tip for the trouble I caused your waiter. What was his name again?"

"Ramon, sir. Table twelve. That's very good of you, sir."

"May I take the service elevator back upstairs? It's closer."

"Of course, sir."

As soon as the elevator door closed and he was alone, Faracy leaned against the wall and expelled a deep breath. "God," he said, "three of them! Three of them handled the goddamn thing!"

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Staring down into the ice bucket he held, he could see the tip of the specimen container's stem. Looking at it, his eyes turned cold and the line of his mouth tightened.

Goddamn you, what *are* you? he wondered helplessly.

On sixteen, Faracy hurried back to his room. Using the lead-lined gloves again, he removed the specimen container from the ice and returned it, wet, to its own special bag, which he sealed and secured back inside the aluminum briefcase. Then he rinsed his face with cold water, drank a long swallow of the now-warm Mumm's, and sat down next to the telephone. Securing an outside line, he dialed the private number of Dr. Bygraves at the DSS center. The night operator answered.

"This is Dr. Faracy. Locate Dr. Bygraves and put me through to him, please."

It took two minutes to get the call through to Arnold Bygraves at home.

"Yes, Curt," the senior doctor answered.

"The project's been compromised," Faracy said. "Three outsiders have handled the specimen container without protection."

There was a heavy, ominous silence at the other end of the line. It was as if Bygraves had stopped breathing. Then he said, "Give me the details, Curt."

The storm ended at three o'clock in the morning. By the time daylight broke over Manhattan, the city was no different than any other spring morning after it had been washed clean by a good rain. Only across the Hudson River and inland into New Jersey did the widespread flood damage become evident. The network news shows, which had been broadcasting on a half-hour-bulletin schedule all night, began showing video footage of the wake of the disaster as soon as there was enough daylight to shoot.

Faracy paid little attention to the news as he quickly shaved and put on the change of clothes he had brought. Dr. Bygraves had called him at four o'clock to tell him that transportation back to Washington had been arranged for him and the specimen. "An Army transport helicopter will pick you up at the World Trade Center heliport at six o'clock. It will bring you directly here."

"What about the Rahway experiment?" Faracy had asked.

"It's canceled, Curt. I had no choice. With the specimen handled by three unprotected persons, it might have become tainted, devitalized in some way. With what we know about its osmotic capabilities,

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it's most certainly been put at risk. My best judgment was that we better fall back and regroup. The Secretary agreed."

"The Secretary?" Faracy felt his ulcer begin to burn.

"Yes. He's coming over for a meeting at ten. You'll be here by then." Bygraves added, "We've got to deal with the problem of the three men, Curt. And quickly."

"Of course," Faracy said. But he frowned. There was something odd in the way Bygraves referred to dealing with the three men.

"See you in a few hours," Bygraves said.

"Yes, sir."

Bygraves had also arranged for a car to take Faracy to the World Trade Center. There was a driver and one escort, both young, clean-cut, dressed in business suits. Both of them glanced at the aluminum briefcase, as if making sure Faracy had it. Neither of them said much during the drive, except to comment on the storm and the floods. Faracy was certain they were FBI agents.

On the heliport at the World Trade Center, the Army helicopter didn't cut its rotor after setting down. An officer debarked, identified Faracy, escorted him aboard, and the ship was airborne again. The officer offered Faracy coffee from a large thermos, which Faracy gratefully accepted.

After that, no one on board spoke to him for the duration of the trip.

Facing Arnold Bygraves that morning was the most humiliating moment Curt Faracy had ever experienced.

"I don't know what to say to you," he told the older doctor. "I feel like the biggest goddamn fool that ever drew breath."

Bygraves leaned forward over his desk and lighted a pipe, puffing clouds of pungent smoke up to the ceiling. He was a square-faced man with thick eyebrows and heavy hands that looked as if they belonged to a brick mason instead of a scientist. "Curt," he said, "I'm not going to minimize the seriousness of the situation by telling you you haven't committed a major blunder. And I'm not going to patronize you with assurances that it won't impede your career. But I am going to point out to you that it's *not* the end of the world. You have a long and impressive record with the department. That's not going to be nullified because you neglected to double-lock your hotel-room door."

Bygraves removed the pipe from his mouth and looked down at it, reflecting. "I've been in scientific service with the government for

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nearly forty years. I know as well as anyone that in the scientific community we make ten mistakes for everything we do right. If the public knew the details of everything we do behind our laboratory doors, hell, we'd all be called Dr. Frankensteins. And if they knew about our mistakes, well—" His voice trailed off, the point made.

"Scientific errors are one thing," Faracy said. "They're expected, they're allowed for. But plain stupidity—that's something altogether different. And that's how the Secretary is going to look at this—I think we both know that."

The intercom sounded and Dr. Bygraves answered it. "The Secretary is at the main gate, Doctor," a female voice announced.

"We're on our way," Bygraves said. He smiled at Faracy. "Speak of the devil. Listen, you let me handle the Secretary. Of the three of us, I'll guarantee he's the most nervous—after all, he's the one who has to report this thing to the President. Be thankful you don't have that job."

When Bygraves and Faracy entered the private, soundproof conference room, Faracy was surprised to see three men already there. Three men he had never seen before. Bygraves stepped forward to greet one of them. "Fred, how are you?" He drew Faracy along with him. "Curt, I want you to meet a man who's done more than one favor for our department over the years. This is Fred Collins. Fred, Dr. Curt Faracy, one of my associates."

As Faracy was shaking hands, the other door to the conference room opened and the Secretary and his assistant strode into the room.

"Let's be seated, gentlemen," the Secretary said peremptorily, taking the chair at the head of the table. Although not extraordinary in appearance, the Secretary had enormous presence. The others in the room fell silent and sat down at once. "Dr. Faracy," the Secretary began, "since you don't know everyone, I'll introduce you." He began, pointing. "Fred Collins, deputy director of the FBI. Martin Burke, aide to the President. And John Atlas, founder and head of the Atlas National Private Detective Agency."

Faracy exchanged nods with each man in turn, keeping his expression as inscrutable as he could. Inside, his stomach began churning. FBI. Presidential aide. *Private detective.* What in hell was this?

"Everyone has been briefed on the unfortunate occurrence in New York last night," the Secretary said. "Fred, what do you have for us?" he asked Collins.

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The FBI executive opened a folder in front of him. "I'm afraid just preliminary information at this stage, Mr. Secretary. Based on what Dr. Faracy told Dr. Bygraves last night, we've determined that the corporate name Norcom, which Dr. Faracy saw on the convention badges of two of the men who were exposed, stands for Norton Communications, Incorporated. It's a fairly new telecommunications firm, about five years old—one of the new breed of telephone-equipment firms that came into being when the FCC deregulated the telephone industry. Its home office is in Milwaukee and it now employs about twelve hundred people throughout the country." Collins looked up from his file. "The two men at the table compromised last night are both regional sales managers for Norcom. It's unfortunate, of course, that two of the three men we might have to remove work for the same firm, but—"

"Excuse me." Faracy interrupted, "what do you mean, *remove?*"

Collins glanced at the Secretary and the Secretary glanced at Dr. Bygraves. "Remove from the general public, Curt," Bygraves said. "Wouldn't you agree that while these men are ultragametic, we should have them under our control?"

"Yes, sir, I would agree. By 'remove,' do we mean hospitalize them?"

"That's one option, yes."

"What other—?"

"Continue, Deputy Collins," the Secretary said before Faracy could finish his question.

Collins did so at once. "As I said, it's unfortunate that two of them work for the same firm—but lucky for us that they're field men and in different areas of the country. If we have to cover their absences, it'll be easier to do with them being so far apart."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand that," Faracy interrupted again. "Why would we have to cover their absences?"

This time when Collins glanced at the Secretary, the glance was not passed on to Bygraves or anyone else. Instead, the Secretary merely stared at Faracy, as if studying him. After a moment of heavy silence, Collins said, "If either of the men were not cooperative, Doctor, there's the possibility that we would have to take that person into custody. In that case, we would either have to provide a cover story for his absence or divulge why we had him."

"The latter, of course, is unthinkable," the Secretary said firmly. "Does that answer your question, Doctor?" And again before Faracy could respond, the Secretary turned his head and said, "Go on, Fred."

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Collins forced a half smile. He clearly didn't like being asked questions that were too specific. Vagueness provided a measure of safety. He cleared his throat. "If we did encounter any problem with Norcom, if there was demand for an explanation regarding the coincidence of two of their regional sales managers disappearing at once, I think we could mollify the situation with an unofficial visit by someone—myself, for instance—to point out that a matter of national security was involved."

"National security!" Faracy exploded. "Now wait a minute—"

"Suppose *you* wait a minute, Dr. Faracy!" the Secretary said sharply. "Perhaps it would be in the best interest of all of us if you would allow Mr. Collins to finish his presentation and *then* ask your questions. There is a pad and pencil in front of you if you'd care to jot down the points that confuse you."

Faracy's jaw clenched. He wasn't accustomed to being spoken to as if he were an adolescent. He didn't like it, even from a man who was directly responsible to the President. His lips parted for a retort, but before he could speak Arnold Bygraves put an allaying hand on his arm. "Patience, Curt, please," he said quietly.

The FBI executive adjusted his tie and continued. "The point I wanted to make is that the Bureau believes that the corporate officers at Norcom would be inclined to quietly sacrifice the two men in question if we could give them some justifiable reason, however vague, to do so. I suggest that the reason can be national security. It's broad enough not to really tell them anything and always sounds serious enough to justify most anything."

Collins turned some pages in his file folder. "Now then, to the men themselves. William P. Joiner of Memphis and Rodney J. Prater of Los Angeles. As I said, I'm afraid at the moment we have only preliminary data pulled from various computers in their respective cities: banks, department stores, vehicle and drivers-license bureaus, voter registration, property records. Joiner is married and Prater is single. Neither have criminal records or credit problems." He closed the folder. "We'll have more complete information in a few hours, Mr. Secretary."

"I believe there was a third man," the Secretary said.

"Yes, sir. A Puerto Rican waiter named Ramon. However, there are three waiters at the New York Hilton named Ramon. We didn't want to inquire directly as to which one worked the table where the Norcom men were sitting—we felt to do so might call attention to the incident. So we're having Immigration conduct what will appear

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to be a routine check for illegal aliens. They'll determine who the three Ramons are, pull their employment records, and we can show photos of them to Dr. Faracy later today. Once he's identified the correct Ramon, the Bureau will take it from there."

"Good," said the Secretary. He turned to John Atlas, the private detective. "Mr. Atlas, I'm sure we can count on you and your agency, as usual, to assist us with all the means at your disposal."

"Of course, Mr. Secretary."

"Excellent. With such able collaboration, I feel certain we'll be able to contain this sudden and perplexing crisis with which we're faced." The Secretary leaned forward. "Now, then, to the exposure itself. Dr. Bygraves, will you give us your evaluation of the dangers from a scientific viewpoint, please?"

"Certainly." Arnold Bygraves placed his pipe in a convenient ashtray. "The primary danger, of course, is that all of the three men who actually touched the specimen container without lead protection on their hands are now in an ultragametic state.

"Let me explain that. An ultragametic state is one in which a living body carries a reproductive organism which of itself is capable of recreating—without merging with another organism. Normally, a human male, as you know, carries only half of such an organism—it must mate with a female organism in order to recreate another human. However, exposure to our specimen container has changed the three men under discussion. Their exposure by touching that container was physically similar to a person touching a container of radium: the person's body is unable to resist absorption of the alpha particles and gamma rays which are emitted by the radium. The same physical process occurred when the men touched our specimen container: the specimen sensed heat from the human hand touching its container and reacted to that heat by issuing its own radiation. That egesta, as it's called, was immediately absorbed into the hand by a process known as IOT—intercellular osmotic transference. In any case of absorption of this nature, an immediate change takes place in the body. In the case of radium transference, as you know, the encroaching egesta begins destroying red corpuscles in the blood and the marrow in the bones. In the case of our specimen, the egesta enters the blood stream and moves directly to the male's testis. The testicles absorb the egesta, and there it remains until the man's next ejaculation. In normal intercourse, when it passes to a female partner, that woman will immediately become pregnant—*no matter what her individual condition at the time.*"

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"Even if she's using a birth-control pill, Doctor?" asked Martin Burke, the presidential aide. "Or wearing a diaphragm?"

"I repeat," Dr. Bygraves said carefully, "no matter *what* her individual condition. The biogenics are far too complex for me to attempt to explain in detail here and now—just let me state unequivocally that the female would become pregnant even if she had undergone a hysterectomy. Even if she had no uterus she could, and would, become pregnant. This egesta is so biologically complex that it's capable of stimulating the growth of a *new* uterus for its reproduction—capable of disintegrating an obstacle such as a diaphragm or a condom, capable of offsetting and reversing the chemical action of a birth-control pill. Capable, in fact, gentlemen, of doing anything it has to do to reproduce."

"And therein lies the crux of our problem," said the Secretary quietly. "What we have at the moment are three men carrying in their testicles a semen that is capable of recreating by the simple act of ejaculation into a woman. *Any* woman, in *any* physical condition."

"Producing what?" Burke asked. "Another human?"

The Secretary pursed his lips and turned to Bygraves, nodding for the senior doctor to answer.

"Another human in appearance," Bygraves said. His voice became quieter. "But there would be—well, more to the progeny than simply being human. We're not prepared at this point to say exactly what. Our studies in that area are inconclusive so far."

"Naturally, we're not prepared to risk dealing with something of such unknown origin," the Secretary added. "That's why you gentlemen have been summoned this morning. We want immediate measures put into motion to intercept these men before they can have sexual intercourse with any female. If we're not in time to do that, then we want the woman or women involved to be apprehended and detained."

"We're presently in the process of selecting a secure, isolated location to keep them in," FBI man Collins said, "so very shortly we'll have a place to take them once they're in custody."

"Excuse me, Mr. Secretary," Faracy said, "but may I ask a question now?"

"What is it, Dr. Faracy?"

"Using words like 'apprehend' and 'custody' sounds as if we're discussing criminals. What exactly is going to happen to these people after we 'detain' them?"

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"That's not been decided yet, Doctor. Our main concern at the moment is removing them from the general population. And, yes, I'm afraid that until they're in our control we must look on them somewhat as criminals. You as much as anyone here, Dr. Faracy, must be aware of the menace to our society presently being carried in the testicles of these exposed men. There could be great potential danger here."

"We're also dealing with three human beings," Faracy said. "Three citizens of the government for which we work!"

As Faracy spoke, Bygraves once again put a placating hand on his arm, but this time Curt wouldn't be dissuaded. "No, I'm sorry, Arnold," he said, "I'm going to make my point." Standing, he faced the Secretary. "With all due respect to your office, sir, I'm having a great deal of difficulty believing some of the things I'm hearing at this meeting. This business about approaching the executives of Norcom with some lie about national security in order to remove two of their employees. Having Immigration find out who that Puerto Rican waiter is so that the FBI can deal with him. Removing any women who've had sexual intercourse with these men. Developing cover stories for those disappearances and taking people to some isolated place to keep them. Suppose they don't want to be 'removed' and 'detained'? What would you do, then—*eliminate* them?"

The Secretary's expression didn't change. Faracy glanced across the table at the FBI man, Collins, and at John Atlas, the private detective whose presence he still couldn't understand. Collins looked as inscrutable as the Secretary, but Atlas had a slight smirk on his lips—a smirk that stopped just short of contempt. Looking at Atlas, Faracy felt a clamminess on the back of his neck. He became aware of a subtle menace in the room.

"You would, wouldn't you?" he quietly answered his own question. "You would eliminate them." Looking at Bygraves, his expression became incredulous. "These men are talking murder, do you realize that, Arnold?"

"At this point it's merely scientific prudence, Curt," the older man replied. There was a plea in his voice that said: *Stop right now, before it's too late.* "We're talking about a period of surveillance, exercising certain precautions—" Suddenly, Bygraves slammed a hand down on the table. "Goddamn it, man, you know what happened with the laboratory animals!"

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"These are not laboratory animals!" Faracy shouted back. "For Christ's sake, Arnold! These are *people!*"

The room went silent. Every pair of eyes at the table fixed on Faracy unrelentingly. A heavy feeling of malevolence seemed to surround him. He searched the face of his colleague Bygraves for a sign of empathy. There was none—he was suddenly an outsider among strangers with whom he could not communicate.

"Excuse me," he said quietly. Turning from the table, he left the room.

As soon as he was gone, the Secretary rose and stepped to a telephone on the wall. "Chief of Security," he told the operator. "Quickly, please."

Faracy hurried upstairs to his office. At his desk, he picked up the telephone. Before he could dial, a thought occurred to him, a thought that brought a ripple of fear. Going back to his office door, he locked it and braced a chair under the knob.

At the phone again, he secured an outside line and called the New York Hilton. Recalling the names of the two diners the previous night, he asked for Rod Prater, the one he now knew to be from Los Angeles, who had seemed to be the more level-headed of the two.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Prater checked out," the hotel operator told him.

He then asked for Bill Pete Joiner, the joker from Memphis who had kidded him about the specimen container looking like a fancy dildo. Joiner came on the line.

"Mr. Joiner," Faracy said, trying to keep his voice calm, "my name is Curt Faracy. I'm the man who came to your table last night looking for that ice bucket. Please listen carefully to what I'm about to say. I lied to you about that object in the ice bucket being a piece of metal sculpture. It was actually a container carrying a specimen of—of a substance that—well, I can't fully explain what it is. But you and your friend and that waiter have been exposed to a kind of radiation that will affect your sperm and make it very powerful."

Bill Pete Joiner laughed. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, I *assure* you it's no joke! Look, I'm a scientist employed by the United States government—"

"Well, that explains it, then," said Joiner. "You're crazy. All gub'ment employees are crazy. Who do you work for, the post office or HUD?" He laughed again.

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There was a knock at Faracy's locked office door. The doorknob was turned several times. Then there was an urgent pounding.

"Mr. Joiner, *listen* to me," Faracy pleaded. "It's extremely important that you don't have sexual intercourse with your wife or any other woman—"

"Hold *on*, now," Joiner cut in. "I'm patriotic enough to give up my wife for the gub'ment, but other women is going too damned far!" Again he roared with laughter.

"Mr. Joiner, *please!* If you have sex with *any* woman, she may be abducted by government agents. I advise you to put yourself in the protective custody of an attorney at once!"

Suddenly the line went dead.

"Hello? Mr. Joiner? Hello?"

As Curt stared at the handset, someone began chopping down his office door from the outside with a fire axe.

Moments later, Faracy was being dragged off an elevator in the sub-basement of the DSS Building. Dr. Bygraves, the FBI man Collins, and John Atlas were standing at the end of a long concrete hallway.

"Put him in here." Bygraves pointed to an open door as the security men approached with the struggling Faracy.

"Are you sure this is secure enough?" Collins asked. "You'll have to hold him here until I can get an unmarked van and some agents to remove him."

"This is a bunker storeroom," Bygraves assured him. "Concrete walls and no windows. One door, solid steel, that locks from the outside only."

"All right," Collins said. "He's your responsibility until my agents arrive. Let's go," he told Atlas. "We've got to get this operation in motion."

When the two men left, Bygraves stared solemnly at Faracy for a moment. The younger doctor was firmly in the grip of two muscular security men. Bygraves shook his head with regret. "I'm sorry, Curt, but you've left us no alternative."

"You think you can just have me drop out of sight?" Faracy challenged him. "You think you can make me disappear as easily as you can a couple of salesmen and a waiter? You're *mistaken,* Arnold—there'll be a television newswoman looking for me in a few hours!"

"I've thought of that. I'm going to call her and say you've been sent to South America on an emergency mission. That should allay

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her suspicions for a day or so. Perhaps by then we'll have this mess in some kind of order."

"And if you don't? What happens then, Arnold? Do I die in the crash of a private plane somewhere?"

"I hope nothing that extreme will be necessary," Bygraves replied. "But if it is, I'm afraid you'll have only yourself to blame." He nodded to the guards. "Lock him in."

A moment later Faracy was alone in the concrete-walled, windowless, steel-doored storeroom.

When Fred Collins and John Atlas left the DSS Building, they went at once to the ultra-modern Washington headquarters of Atlas National Private Detective Agency, less than half a mile from the FBI Building. On the way, Collins used an FBI cellular line to call his office and order an unmarked van and four agents to transfer Curt Faracy from the DSS Building to a safe house the Bureau had in nearby Virginia.

When they arrived at the detective agency, as Atlas sat down at a white tubular desk in an office almost equally white, Collins asked, "Who are you going to use for this operation, John?"

"I thought Caunt," said Atlas.

Collins considered that for a moment. Philip Caunt was a slight young man with a very large Adam's apple that rose and fell when he talked. Collins could never remember seeing him smile. As an adolescent, Caunt had murdered his parents one night for no apparent reason. John Atlas had somehow rescued him from a prison mental ward some years later and Caunt had been singularly loyal to Atlas ever since.

Atlas used his intercom to summon Caunt to the office. While they waited for him, Collins asked, "What code name do you think we should give this operation?"

"Do we really need a code name, Fred? We'll probably have this thing cleared up in two or three days."

"The Bureau likes to have code names for everything, John, you know that," Collins said.

"Well, why don't you pick one, Fred? You're very good at it."

"Okay. What about Operation Eunuch?"

"Eunuch?" Atlas frowned.

"Yes. After all, that's what we're trying to do, isn't it? With these three carriers?"

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"Yes, I suppose it is." Atlas forced a smile. "All right, Fred, Operation Eunuch it is."

Moron, he thought.

Philip Caunt arrived and the two men briefed him on Bill Pete Joiner and Rod Prater. "Our offices in Los Angeles and Memphis already have local operatives keeping their residences under surveillance, and a computer line has been cleared for exclusive use in the operation—the terminal will have a standby agent on it around the clock. One of our agency jets with two pilots on board has been checked out to you. You can call ahead for local operatives to provide ground transportation wherever you go. I'll have a safe house established in both Los Angeles and Memphis for interrogation and detention purposes. You must determine every move each of these two men has made since nine o'clock last night in New York. Above all, you must determine whether either of them has had sexual intercourse. If they haven't, we'll simply detain them for now. If they have, you must determine with whom they were intimate and detain—or terminate—that person. Clear?"

"Clear, sir," Philip Caunt replied quietly. His pale-blue eyes registered no emotion.

"Keep us informed every step of the way," Collins added when Atlas finished the briefing. "We'll want to cover any disappearances or deaths as quickly as possible."

Atlas put a paternal arm around Caunt's narrow shoulders. "Do an especially good job for me on this one, Philip."

"I will, sir," replied Caunt, looking at Atlas almost with adoration.

Psychos, thought Fred Collins.

In the basement storeroom where he was held prisoner, Curt Faracy paced like a man awaiting execution. Oblivious to the floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with lab supplies, he silently berated himself. Why in hell hadn't he remained calm during that meeting? All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and pretend to go along with whatever they said and he could have walked out with no suspicion attached to him. Then he would have been free to help those two salesmen and that waiter. He was certain his interrupted phone call to Bill Pete Joiner had done no good at all—Joiner thought the whole thing was a big joke.

Then suddenly he stopped pacing and stared at a double-doored metal cabinet at the end of the room. On its doors was stenciled in red: CHEMICALS LOCKER—DO NOT LEAVE OPEN.

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Chemicals, Faracy thought. *Chemicals,* for God's sake!

Trying the cabinet doors, he found them to be locked. Searching the room for some kind of tool to pry the lock, he found a laboratory-size claw hammer. Forcing its curved claws between the doors, he worked for several minutes but the lock was too strong. On impulse, he tried the outer edge of one door near its bottom hinge. To his surprise, he was able to snap the hinge off almost at once. Quickly, he broke the other two, then was able to bend the entire door away from its frame.

Searching through the boxes and bottles of dry and liquid chemicals, he began removing what he needed, muttering as he did, "Fulminic acid—ammonium nitrate—dry nitrocellulose—"

When he had seven chemicals on a small table, he pulled a beaker from a shelf and silently recited thermochemistry formulae and reactions as he mixed, stirred, held the beaker up to the ceiling light to study viscosity, and finally added dry cellulose to the liquid and molded it with his hands into a yellowish, puttylike substance. Taking it over to the single steel door, he packed the pliable mass into and around the lock, pressing it carefully into place and spreading it evenly.

Then, standing back away from the door, he took the claw hammer and threw it violently against the putty. There was a sudden flash and a small explosion, and it blew the fire-door lock completely off.

Rushing into the hall, Faracy called on his seven years' knowledge of the DSS Building to get from the sub-basement to the underground parking garage and up to street level before the security force fully realized what he had done. By the time the guards found out what had happened, he was outside and had disappeared onto busy South Capitol Street.

Back at the Atlas offices, after Philip Caunt left, Fred Collins brought up the matter of Ramon, the Puerto Rican waiter.

"When Immigration gets photos of the three Ramons, we'll have no way to identify the right one now that Faracy isn't on the team. So I've decided we should consider them *all* carriers. And I think we should deal with them all without bothering with detention. What do you think?"

"I think you're probably right," John Atlas agreed. "We should keep that part of it as simple as possible. Handled properly, I don't think we have to anticipate any repercussions."

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The intercom sounded and Atlas answered it. "Priority call for Deputy Director Collins, sir," his secretary said. "Dr. Bygraves from DSS."

Reaching across the desk, Collins turned on the speaker phone. "This is Collins."

"Curt Faracy just got away," Bygraves told him.

"What?" Collins began to turn red. "Got away *how?* I thought you said you could hold him until my agents got there!"

"He mixed some chemicals and blew open the steel door."

"You idiot!" Collins shouted. "How long has he been out?"

"Ten minutes, fifteen at the most. Now see here, Collins, you can't talk to me like that—I'm not one of your agents, you know."

"You're not smart enough to be one of my agents, you imbecile! I'll deal with you later!" Collins turned off the speaker phone and stood up. "I've got to get over to the Bureau and put a net out for this Faracy. John, this thing on the waiter: I'd like you to handle it personally."

"Me?" Atlas was incredulous. "It's been a long time since I've done any field work, Fred."

"I know, but I'd feel much more comfortable knowing that at least the New York part of this can of worms was being done right. Can I count on you?"

"Of course, Fred."

"Good. I'll be in touch."

Collins strode from the office and John Atlas sat down heavily and stared at his white-inlaid desktop. Take care of it *personally*. That was something he hadn't counted on.

He wondered how it would feel to kill again.

Curt Faracy sat in a phonebooth in Union Station, the receiver to his ear as if engaged in a call, while he watched the Massachusetts Avenue entrance. Lila had said she'd be there within fifteen minutes. According to the big clock in the terminal, twelve had passed.

Lila Goddard had been surprised to hear his voice. "Your boss called a little while ago and said you were on your way to South America."

"Bygraves lied to you," Faracy had told her. "Listen, honey, I'm in trouble. Can you meet me for a few minutes?"

Just as the terminal clock passed fourteen minutes, Faracy saw Lila walk briskly in and head toward the bank of baggage lockers

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as he'd instructed her. After making sure she wasn't being followed, he left the booth and intercepted her.

"What's going on, Curt?" she asked.

"Come on," he said, taking her arm. He guided her to the most isolated table he could find in the self-serve cafeteria, sat her with her back to the rest of the room because she was easily recognizable, and got them both coffee.

"Listen to me, Lila," he said quietly, leaning toward her. "I don't have much time—there's a Metroliner for New York in a few minutes and I have to be on it—but I'll tell you as much as I can. The secret project I've been working on involves a powerful sperm capable of reproducing on its own without mating with another cell. It's a unique biological phenomenon—it can recreate in anything: plants, animals, humans."

"My God!"

"It's something that could change mankind completely. I know that sounds melodramatic, but it's true. Now here's the problem: three men have been exposed to the substance and are carrying the sperm in their reproductive glands."

Faracy told her the whole story, beginning with the removal of the ice bucket from his hotel room the previous night, up to his escape an hour earlier from the DSS Building.

"What are you going to do now?" Lila asked. "Why are you going back to New York?"

"I've got to have some way of proving what I just told you," he explained. "Right now it would only be my word against those of the Secretary, the head of DSS, a deputy FBI director, and God knows how many others. They could say anything to discredit me: I was having a nervous breakdown, or I had been exposed to some chemical that made me delusional—any lie at all. But if I can find that waiter, Ramon—he'd be able to substantiate everything I've told you. I'll bring him to you—we can go on the air with the whole thing!"

Lila's eyes were charged with excitement. "What do you want me to do?"

"Start digging," he said. "Look for a connection between the FBI and the Atlas National Detective Agency. See what you can find out about John Atlas himself. Monitor the movements of the Secretary, Bygraves, and Collins. Ask around as discreetly as you can and see if there are any high-level law-enforcement executives not con-

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nected with the FBI—maybe somebody from the Attorney General's office—who doesn't like Collins and the Bureau."

Faracy looked out at the clock. "I've got to go. I'll keep in touch by phone." Leaning over the table, he kissed Lila tenderly on the lips.

In Spanish Harlem, Ramon Sedillo woke up from a sound sleep on the living-room couch of a modest but neat little apartment. As he sat up rubbing his eyes, a pretty young girl of fourteen, Milena Quevas, came out of the bedroom dressed for school, carrying books. Looking at Ramon, she shook her head with a grin. "When are you going to give up?" she asked, stepping into the alcove kitchen and putting her books down.

"Give up what?" Ramon asked sleepily.

"Trying to get Mama to go to bed with you. Every time you bring her home, you end up sleeping on the couch." Milena poured cereal and milk into a bowl.

"I'm getting closer all the time," Ramon said confidently. "Used to be I didn't get past the front door. One of these nights, kid."

The bedroom door opened again. "One of these nights, what?" asked Milena's mother, Candida Quevas, a shapely, pretty woman of only thirty. A topless dancer by night and beautician student by day, she bore a striking resemblance to the young Yvonne DeCarlo.

"One of these nights I'll get you into bed," said Ramon in answer to her question.

"You won't enjoy it," Candida promised.

"No? Why not?"

"Because I'll be a very old woman. Too old to run or resist."

"Very funny." Ramon's expression turned wretched. "Candida, why do you torture me like this?"

Candida got a spoon and took a bite of cereal from Milena's bowl. "You torture *yourself,* hombre. I don't force you to be miserable."

Ramon started putting on his shoes. "You're impossible. I can't stand this any more, Candida. I've made up my mind: I'm going to commit suicide. I'll leave a note blaming you. The people of the neighborhood will ostracize you. Then what will you do?"

"Move to another neighborhood," Candida said, shrugging.

"Heartless and cruel," Ramon said, rising. "This is the end. You'll never see me alive again." Head hung, he walked to the door.

"Don't forget Feleciadad's birthday party tonight at Consuelo's house," Candida reminded him.

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"I'll be dead," Ramon mumbled.

After Ramon was gone, as Milena finished her cereal and washed the bowl, she asked, "Why *do* you let him sleep on the couch, Mama? It makes everyone think you're sleeping with him."

"And because they think that," Candida said, "none of the other *machos* in the neighborhood come sniffing around, *comprende?*"

Smiling, Milena hugged her mother. "But don't you ever long for—well, you know? A man to love?"

"Sometimes," Candida admitted. "But I get a little release with the dancing, you know? And the rest of the time I'm too busy with beautician school and trying to make a halfway decent homelife with you to think about it. You know, *criatura,* I was only a year older than you are now when I got pregnant with you. I didn't really have time to be a teenager. I went right from little girl to woman. But I don't want that to happen to you. I want you to have these teenage years, I want you to finish high school. And I don't want a lot of sharpies and studs hanging around while you're growing up. Ramon doesn't realize it, but he's the one who keeps the others away. They think I'm taken, you know?"

A glow of pride rose in Milena's eyes. "You're something else, Mama."

Candida whirled her daughter around, slapped her on the rear, and said, "Go on to high school, freshman. *Pronto!*"

Getting off his flight at Memphis International Airport, Bill Pete Joiner stepped up to a payphone and called his wife, Virginia.

"Me," he said when she answered. "I'm at the airport, fixin' to get my car and go to the office. Any calls while I was gone?"

"I'm fine, thank you," said Virginia.

"I was just about to ask how you were, Virginia. You know, you just never give a man a chance. What did the doctor say about your headaches?"

"Tension. He said they were caused by tension."

Joiner grunted quietly. "Tension, huh? I guess that means me."

"Dr. Elbert *did* ask how we get along."

"And what'd you tell him?"

"I smiled and lied."

Joiner glanced at the luggage conveyor. The bags had not started coming in yet.

"I've got to go," he said. "My bag just came out. Listen, I'll be late tonight. First day back and all."

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"No, Bill Pete," she told him firmly, "not tonight. Tonight you come home on time. You and I have to talk."

"We'll talk tomorrow night."

"We'll talk *tonight.*" She paused. "I've decided to see a lawyer, Bill Pete."

Christ Almighty damn, Joiner thought, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling.

"I'm serious," Virginia declared.

Joiner pictured her in his mind: once tall and slim, she was now skinny, bony. Once alabaster-complexioned, she was now just plain pale. Her once fine auburn hair was thinning, her once firm breasts were sagging, there was a belly where once there had been none. The only thing that hadn't changed about Virginia was her inheritance of sixty-five thousand a year. For life. Guaranteed.

"All right," he said. "I'll be home by six."

Loosening his tie, Joiner made a second call. This one was answered by a musky voice that sounded as if its owner had been sleeping. Which Joiner suspected was true, since it was barely noon there in Memphis.

"April, honey, I can't make it tonight," he said. "Business meeting. But I want to see you sometime today."

"Aw'right, sugar. I'll be here."

Joiner pictured April as he had Virginia. April was young and firm, with smooth, milk-chocolate skin. She sweated a lot and always smelled like soil after a light rain. Expensive to keep, she was well worth it to Bill Pete Joiner. "I'll be over sometime this afternoon, sugar," he said, and hung up.

While waiting for his suitcase, Joiner remembered the crazy telephone call he received that morning before leaving the hotel. What was it the guy had said about not having sex with anybody? What the hell had that been all about? Government agents, abduction, powerful sperm—he couldn't recall exactly. But it was probably a joke, he decided—that goddamn Bubba Thornton down in Houston had probably put somebody up to it. I'll get even with that sum'bitch, he thought, grinning.

When he got his bag, Joiner decided to drop it off at home on his way to the office. And to buy Virginia a box of candy and surprise her. A few minutes of sweet talk, a few new promises, and he'd have all that bullshit about seeing a lawyer out of her head. After all, sixty-five thousand a year was very nice overhead money.

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He walked out of the terminal whistling.

When he got off the train at Grand Central Station in New York, Faracy went to a public phone and called the Hilton again. He was going to try one more time to convince Bill Pete Joiner that what he was saying was no joke. But Joiner had checked out shortly after Faracy had called him that morning.

Contacting long-distance directory assistance, he obtained the phone numbers of the Norcom offices in Memphis and Los Angeles. Using his Sprint card, he got through to Joiner's secretary in Memphis and learned that Joiner was expected back from New York sometime this afternoon. But from Norcom's Los Angeles office, he found out that Rod Prater was stopping at the company's headquarters in Milwaukee for a day and wasn't expected back until the following morning. Faracy got Norcom's headquarters number in Milwaukee and tried there. Prater had not yet arrived.

Hanging up the receiver, Faracy leaned his head against the phone box for a moment. I'm losing, he thought dully. I won't be able to reach those two before the men Collins and Atlas send get to them. And even if I did reach them, I probably couldn't convince either of them I wasn't crazy. He was sure that's what Joiner must have thought that morning.

But he could still get to Ramon, the waiter, because they didn't know which Ramon they were looking for.

Hurrying out of the terminal, he got into a waiting cab. "Hilton Hotel," he told the driver.

As the cab plied through midtown Manhattan traffic, Faracy leaned his head back and closed his eyes. A heavy weariness settled over him and he realized for the first time that he had a burning stomach ache. He hadn't eaten since dinner the previous night and his ulcer was letting him know it.

Inside the Hilton, Faracy found the personnel office. Several maids and other employees were in line, signing for and receiving their paychecks.

A clerk came forward to help Faracy and he inquired about the waiter, Ramon.

"I'm sorry, sir," he was told, "but we have a strict policy against giving out any information about our employees."

"This is a somewhat urgent matter," Faracy insisted.

"Sorry, sir. It's against the rules."

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No matter how much Faracy tried to persuade him and the office manager, they would not give him Ramon's last name or his address. As he was arguing with them, two unsmiling men in business suits entered the office. Suspecting who they were, Faracy quietly backed off. As he left the office, he heard one of the men say, "We're from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, making a routine check for illegal alien employees. We'd like to see your personnel files, please."

In the hall, he leaned against the wall and sighed wearily.

"Hey, man," a voice said.

Faracy turned to see a Puerto Rican wearing thick eyeglasses. It was Ordonez, the waiter Ramon had cover for him so he could see Candida Quevas the previous night. Ordonez had been in the office getting his paycheck and overheard Faracy inquire about Ramon. "What you want Ramon for?" he asked. "You a bill collector or something?"

"No," Faracy said, pushing away from the wall. "I'm trying to contact two men who sat at one of Ramon's tables last night. They were wearing name badges and I thought Ramon might remember their names." He took some currency from his pocket. "It's pretty important to me," he said pointedly.

"How important?" Ordonez asked.

Faracy held out a twenty. "Do you know where he lives?"

"No, but I can tell you somebody who does." Faracy gave him the twenty. "Go to the Club San Juan," Ordonez told him. "Lenox Avenue near one thirty-ninth. Ramon's girl friend works there. Her name's Candida something."

"What's Ramon's last name?"

"Sedillo."

"Thanks!" Faracy all but shouted. Excitement surged through him. Maybe this was the breakthrough that would help him end this madness.

Almost running, he left the hotel and got into another taxi.

Lila, with two dozen scribbled notes on her desk at the television studio, was dialing her twentieth outside call of the day when her secretary came in and said, "There's a Dr. Arnold Bygraves to see you. He doesn't have an appointment, but he seems to think you'll see him."

Lila's sculpted eyebrows went up and she replaced the receiver. "Show him in."

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As Bygraves entered, Lila regarded him warily. He looked knowingly at her and said, "Let's don't waste each other's time fencing, Miss Goddard. The telephone calls you've been making all afternoon are generating discomfort in some very sensitive areas."

"I'm merely making inquiries, Doctor," said Lila. "In the public interest. Are you here to try and stop that?"

"Not at all." Bygraves smiled slightly. "As I said, let's not fence. I'm here to offer you a proposition—one that can make you a reporter not only of national but of international renown. An exclusive on the most challenging—and threatening—scientific discovery since the harnessing of the atom. Are you interested?"

"I'd be a fool if I wasn't," Lila replied. "But what's this great scoop going to cost me?"

"Help us find Curt Faracy—before he puts all of mankind in jeopardy."

Lila shook her head. "Not unless you can convince me I should be on your side instead of his, Doctor." Her expression hardened.

"That might be easier than you think. How much do you know about Curt's work?"

"Practically nothing," she lied.

"Then get ready for the most incredible story you'll probably ever hear. The secret project Curt has been working on involves an alien substance that was accidentally brought back to earth by one of the space flights.

"Do you remember Apollo 13, the flight that had a problem in outer space when one of its fuel lines ruptured? Well, something got into that fuel line. A speck of something no larger than a grain of sand. It survived re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, survived the splashdown, and continued to survive undetected for years afterward. It lay dormant down at Cape Kennedy and at the Houston Space Center while NASA ran thousands of post-flight tests on the ship. Finally the craft was given to the Smithsonian Institute for display. Before it went to the Smithsonian, however, it was sent to us to be cleaned up and sterilized. We did a routine microscopic surface probe of it inside and out. That's how we found the speck.

"We've had it three years now: cultivating it, watching it grow, trying to determine exactly what it is. We still don't know, nor can we say where it came from. What we do know is that it's ultragametic and can reproduce by itself whatever it can incubate. Put one of its minuscule cells on a living plant and it will reproduce another

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plant identical to the first, but much stronger—*so* strong, in fact, it will strangle and kill the original plant.

"Put its cell into a female laboratory animal and it will duplicate that animal with one with several times the strength and mentality, and will consume—actually eat as food—the animal it came from, as well as others around it. We can only speculate what kind of human variety it will reproduce, but I'm sure you can see the inherent danger. Are you impressed so far?"

"Amazed," Lila admitted. Curt hadn't told her nearly this much. Of course, he'd been rushed for time, but still—

"I hope," Bygraves said, noting her thoughtful expression, "you'll be amazed enough to help us after you hear the rest of the story."

When Philip Caunt landed in Memphis, he was met by an Atlas agent who gave him a report on Bill Pete Joiner.

"He got in a little while ago on a Northwest flight from New York, made a couple of calls at a pay phone, then claimed his bag, got his car from the long-term parking lot, and drove home. On the way, he made one stop, at a Godiva Chocolates shop, and bought a box of candy. When he got home, he stayed one hour and eleven minutes, then left again. He's on his way downtown to his office right now."

"Can we get to his office before he does?" Caunt asked.

"I think so," the agent said.

"Let's go, then," Caunt ordered.

As they moved in and out of traffic on Elvis Presley Boulevard, the agent, at the wheel, contacted by radio the surveillance team following Joiner. Determining their location, he said, "We'll make it to Joiner's office about ten minutes ahead of them, Mr. Caunt."

"Good. Tell the surveillance agents to move in and conduct a low-profile pickup as soon as he parks his car."

Caunt and the agent were parked outside the Norcom offices when Bill Pete Joiner pulled into a parking garage next door. The surveillance car followed him in and Caunt's car followed.

When Joiner got out of his car, he was immediately accosted by the two agents from the surveillance car and forced into the back seat.

"What the hell's going on?" Joiner asked, good-naturedly nervous. "What you boys up to here?"

"Just keep quiet, please," one of them said as he got in beside him in the back seat.

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"If this is a kidnap," Bill Pete joked, "my wife'll probably pay as much as thirty-five dollars for me."

"No talking, please," the agent next to him said, putting the muzzle of a pistol against Bill Pete's ribs.

The driver of the surveillance car called Philip Caunt on the radio. "Where to now, sir?"

"To the safe house," Caunt told him.

John Atlas, dressed as a Catholic priest, debarked an airport shuttle in Manhattan and took a taxi to Columbia University. During the taxi ride, he studied the personnel files that had been couriered to him by Immigration agents of three Puerto Rican waiters employed at the New York Hilton. All of the addresses in the files were in Spanish Harlem.

At Columbia, Atlas left the taxi and took a subway to the neighborhood of the waiter who lived closest, a man named Ramon Fuentes.

No one bothered Atlas as he walked the streets of Spanish Harlem. His priest's garb was his pass. He was even greeted cordially by people he passed. At the tenement building at the address on the first file, Atlas walked up three flights to a rear apartment and knocked.

"Yeah, who's there?" a male voice asked from inside.

"Father John, from the church," Atlas answered.

The door was opened by a short, muscular man wearing pants and an undershirt. From behind him, Atlas could hear an infant crying and a woman's voice trying to soothe it.

"Are you Ramon Fuentes?" Atlas asked.

"Yes, Father," Fuentes replied, frowning. "What's the matter?"

Atlas pressed his elbow against his side and a four-inch commando knife was sprung from its base on his forearm into his right hand. Without a word, he drove the blade into the side of Fuentes' neck and pulled it forward far enough to cut his throat. Long an expert in this kind of killing, he knew exactly which way the victim's blood would spurt, and he deftly moved to avoid it. As the gurgling man fell, Atlas stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

As he started toward the bedroom, a woman came out. She was dark and wore only a slip. Atlas wished he had time to have a little amusement with her, but there were two more calls to make. Clamping a hand over her mouth, he pushed the knife expertly through her sternum directly into her aorta. Lowering her to the

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floor, he left her there with a bubble of blood spreading across the front of her slip.

In the bedroom, he found only the little brown toddler standing up in a crib, crying in the disconsolate way that hungry babies do. Atlas stared at the child for a moment, then his steel-trap mind remembered a minor detail from the other room. He went back to a hotplate on which there was a pan of boiling water with a baby bottle of milk in it. With a kitchen towel, he turned off the burner, removed the bottle, and returned to the bedroom. Lying the baby down in the crib, he gave it the bottle and the baby immediately stopped crying.

Leaving the apartment door ajar several inches so that someone would find the baby before too long, Atlas walked downstairs and out of the building.

At the safe house, an isolated farm just outside Memphis, Bill Pete Joiner sat at a kitchen table, flanked on each side by the two surveillance agents, as Philip Caunt prepared to question him. Bill Pete kept up his "good old boy" act and tried not to seem nervous. "Why don't you fellows just tell me what this is all about?" he asked. "Look, if it's some kind of industrial espionage, just say so. I'll tell you whatever I know about Norcom's products."

"We're not interested in Norcom," Caunt said, "we're interested in you. I want to know everything you did during the seventy-one minutes you were in your home a little while ago. Everything."

Bill Pete frowned and then shrugged. "Well, I had a Bloody Mary while Virginia unpacked my bag for me. Virginia's my wife. Then me and Virginia, well, we had a little play time." He winked conspiratorially. "I'd been gone for three days, and the little woman was—"

"All right, that's enough," Caunt interrupted him. Bobbing his chin at the two surveillance agents, he said, "Keep him here." Then to his driver, "Let's go."

Caunt and the agent drove several miles to a manicured golf-course neighborhood where the Joiners resided in a split-level home just off the sixth tee. Parking in the driveway, they approached the house as if they were legitimate businessmen, insurance salesmen perhaps, making a call.

Virginia Joiner answered the bell. She was a slim, not at all unattractive woman.

"Mrs. Joiner," said Caunt, showing federal-government identification he carried, "we're with the National Security Agency. Your

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husband is in our custody. He's asked that we bring you to him so he can discuss getting an attorney. Will you come with us, please?"

"Why, what on earth—?" Virginia Joiner said.

"I'll explain the whole thing in the car, Mrs. Joiner," Caunt assured her.

"Why, all right. My goodness. May I just get my purse?"

In the car, Caunt sat in the back seat with Virginia Joiner. Although she tried, she couldn't contain her anxiety. "I declare, I can't imagine what Bill Pete has to do with National Security."

Caunt glanced at her. She was, in his eyes, sparrowlike and proper—delicate, charming. Much like the mother he had murdered years earlier. But I might as well tell her, he thought: there was no reason not to now that she was in custody. "Your husband has been exposed to a very powerful chemical of some kind," he said. "He may have transmitted it to you when he had sex with you earlier today."

Virginia Joiner stared at him aghast. "Sex? With me? Why, that's ridiculous—Bill Pete and I haven't had sex in more than a year."

Caunt's expression became incredulous. "Are you telling me the truth?" he asked in a deadly quiet voice.

Virginia's lips tightened spitefully and she was no longer attractive. "I haven't allowed him to touch me since—well, I just don't, that's all."

"That lying clown," Caunt muttered. "Step on it," he told the driver.

When the car pulled into the driveway of the isolated farmhouse, Virginia began to get angry. "Just what in the world is this place?" she demanded. "I don't believe you men are government agents at all!"

"Quiet!" Caunt snapped angrily and dragged her by the arm out of the car.

On the porch, Caunt and the driver tensed. The front door was standing open. Drawing their guns, they peered inside—and saw the two agents they left behind were unconscious. Bill Pete Joiner was nowhere in sight.

"Check out back!" Caunt instructed. He looked around, amazed. "What the hell could have happened here?"

"I'll tell you what probably happened," Virginia said. "Your men there fell for Bill Pete's good-old-boy routine, and when they got careless enough he jumped them. For your information, he happens to be a ninth-degree Black Belt. I'm surprised he even let you bring him here."

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The driver hurried back in. "The other car's gone."

"*Damn* it!" Caunt fumed. "There's no telling where he is!"

"I'll tell you where to look for him if you'll let me go," Virginia said.

Caunt stared thoughtfully at her. "You sure you two didn't—"

"I *told* you—no!"

"All right, I'll let you go. Where do you say he is?"

"Probably hiding out at the apartment of his mistress. Her name is April something. She lives at the Live Oak Apartments."

"Thanks," said Caunt. From his coat pocket he took a silencer and affixed it to the muzzle of his pistol. Calmly, he shot Virginia Joiner twice in the chest.

"Let's go," he told the driver. "You heard her. The Live Oak Apartments."

John Atlas, still dressed as a priest, knocked on the door of a basement apartment. It was opened by an older, slightly stoop-shouldered man with a neat grey moustache. Atlas smiled. "Ramon Arrata?"

"*Si, Padre.*"

Atlas slugged him in the temple with a leather-covered sap and Arranta dropped to the floor like a wet rope. Stepping past him, Atlas looked around quickly. He was in a small, cluttered kitchen. In the only other room, a tiny alcove sleeping area, he found an elderly woman—Arranta's mother, perhaps—very shriveled and frail-looking, asleep in bed. Next to the bed was an old-fashioned wooden wheelchair.

Cunning flashed in the hard eyes of John Atlas. Might as well make this one look good.

In the kitchen, he dragged Arranta over next to the stove. From a pan on one burner, he took a spoonful of thick black-bean paste and smeared it on the sole of the unconscious man's left shoe, putting a little more on the floor. Then he opened the oven door and turned on the gas jet without lighting it. He found some brown bread and put it in the oven. Nice, he thought, surveying his work. Arranta was going to heat up some brown bread. After he turned on the oven, before he could light it, he slipped on some spilled black-bean paste, hit his head on the stove corner, and knocked himself out. He and the poor crippled woman in the next room were asphyxiated.

Leaving the apartment, Atlas started for the address of the last person on his list: Ramon Sedillo . . .

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The Club San Juan was just opening when Faracy walked in. The bartender, used to seeing only Latinos in the club, eyed him suspiciously.

"The girls don't start dancing for another half hour," he said in a less than welcoming tone.

"I'm looking for a girl named Candida," Faracy said.

"I just tol' you, man, the girls aren't here yet."

"Can you give me her address? It's very important."

The bartender shook his head emphatically. "We don't give out no addresses of the dancers. Club rules." Faracy took some currency out of his pocket, but the bartender shook his head again. "Don't insult me, man," he warned. Faracy asked if the bartender knew Candida's boy friend, Ramon Sedillo. "No," the bartender said, "I don't know nobody."

There was nothing Faracy could do but wait for Candida to come to work. Using a pay phone on the wall, he called Lila collect at her office.

"Curt, where are you?" she asked urgently.

"Would you believe I'm in Spanish Harlem waiting for a go-go dancer to come to work?"

"Are you all right?"

"So far. Have you been able to find out anything? I presume the whole world is looking for me."

"Yes." Lila paused, then said, "Dr. Bygraves was here this afternoon. He told me all about the project."

"He *what?*"

"Yes. Everything from the time DSS found the substance on the spacecraft until now. He asked me to help them find you."

"And?"

"I told him you were currently a news source and I was bound by journalistic ethics to protect you. Of course, I didn't tell him that until after he gave me the whole story about the project. Unfortunately, the story isn't going to do me any good. I can't confirm it and Bygraves says he'll deny it if I broadcast it."

"You'll be able to confirm it through me," Faracy promised, "as soon as I find the man I'm looking for." He saw two Puerto Rican women come into the club. The bartender spoke to one of them and nodded toward Faracy at the phone. "Listen," he said quickly, "I think the woman I'm waiting for is here. I'll call you again later."

Hanging up, Faracy approached Candida Quevas. "May I speak to you? It's about Ramon Sedillo."

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At a corner table, he told Candida as much as he thought she could understand, without becoming too technical. Candida, frowning suspiciously, wasn't sure whether Faracy was crazy or lying. But she was not about to trust him.

"Look, mister, I don't know who you are," she told him flatly. "You could be from Immigration, you could be from the income-tax place checking on Ramon's tips, you could be a bill collector—you could be anybody."

"Believe me, I'm not any of those," Faracy said. "Listen, this is extremely important. Will you just call Ramon on the phone for me? Tell him the man who was looking for the ice bucket last night is here. He'll know what you're talking about. Ask him to come down here right away. Please."

Candida finally agreed to make the call. "You wait over at the bar," she told Faracy. "I'll see what he says."

Atlas was just entering Ramon's building. There was a teenaged Puerto Rican girl in the hallway. "Which apartment does Ramon Sedillo live in, child?" he asked.

"Third floor in the rear, Father."

Atlas smiled at her. "Does he live there with his wife?"

"Ramon isn't married, Father. He lives alone."

"Thank you, dear," he said.

On the third floor, he knocked on Ramon's door. "Yeah, who is it?" Ramon asked.

"Father John, from the church," said Atlas.

Ramon opened the door. "I'm just about to leave for work, Father. You collecting for something?"

"No, I'm here about the girl, my son," Atlas said. "May I come in?"

"Sure." Ramon stood aside as he entered. "What girl, Father?" he asked.

"The girl you were with last night."

Ramon frowned. "Candida? What about her?"

"Did you have carnal knowledge of her last night, Ramon?"

"What? Father, what's this all about?"

Atlas slapped him hard across the face, shoved him back into the room, and drew a gun. "Lie down on the floor," he ordered. "Quickly!"

When he had Ramon face down, Atlas knelt next to him and fished his wallet out of Ramon's pocket. Fingering through it, he found a small address book and scanned it. "Candida Quevas, is that her

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name? One One twenty-ninth Street? Is that her?" He prodded Ramon with his gun.

"Yeah!"

"Did you and she make it last night?" Atlas got no answer. He prodded again, harder. "Did you?"

"Yeah, sure! I mean, she's my girl! What's this all about? You ain't no priest, man!"

"Shut up and hold still!" Atlas removed a hypodermic needle from a leather folder he took from his inside coat pocket. He plunged it through Ramon's trousers and into his buttock and emptied it. "Just relax, Ramon," he said, still holding the gun in place. "You're about to go on the best and last high of your life. You just overdosed on the purest heroin ever produced."

In two minutes, Ramon was having spasms. While death was seizing his body, there was a knock at the door. Atlas opened it just far enough to see it was the young girl from downstairs.

"Father, there's a call for Ramon on the hall phone."

"Tell them to call back later," Atlas told her. "Ramon is praying right now."

At the Club San Juan, Candida hung up the phone and joined Faracy at the bar. "They said to call back later," she told him. "I'm sorry, but that's all I can do for you."

"Look, Miss," Faracy began to plead again, "I've got to get in touch with Ramon *now*. It's *urgent*. He's in great danger—and you may be, too."

"I'm not telling you where he lives, and that's final," Candida said stubbornly. She turned to leave and Faracy grabbed her by the arm.

"Wait, please try to understand—"

"Let me go!" Candida ordered angrily.

The bartender hurried around and poked a thick wooden nightstick in Faracy's face. "Turn her loose or I'll split your head!"

Faracy let go of Candida's arm and backed off. The bartender pointed the stick toward the door. "Take off, man. You don't belong here no ways. Move it."

Faracy left. Out on the sidewalk, he looked around indecisively. What now? he wondered. Where did he go now, what did he do next? He had no answer. All he could do was stand there, shaking his head helplessly. He could feel defeat in his throat. He was losing the battle. As well as the war . . .

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At the Live Oak Apartments in Memphis, April was in the kitchen pouring two beers. Bill Pete Joiner was lying on his stomach in bed, a frown on his face as he thought about everything that had happened. The men who kidnaped him were private detectives—he had looked in their wallets after he karate-chopped them unconscious. A slight smile came over his face as he thought about it. Wimps, trying to act tough with him.

But *why* had they kidnaped him? And what was all that stuff in the telephone call about not having sex because of something powerful being in his sperm?

The apartment doorbell rang. "There's our pizza," April called from the kitchen. She hurried into the living room. "Just a sec!" she told the door as she stopped to get ten dollars from her purse. Then she opened the door and froze, startled by the sight of a slight young man with a large Adam's apple.

"Is Mr. Joiner here?" he asked.

"Why, ah—who did you say?" April asked.

"You heard me," Philip Caunt said, reading her expression. Pushing his way in, he closed the door with one hand and drew his gun with the other. The pistol's silencer was still in place. "Where is he?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Swallowing, April led him to the bedroom. "Bill Pete—"

Rolling over, Joiner looked up and saw Caunt. "You again? Damn it, I'm getting a little tired of this game." In a fluid movement, he was off the bed and had assumed a karate attack posture. "Put down that gun and fight like a man," he challenged.

Caunt looked at him and shot him twice in the chest. Joiner's body slammed back against the dresser and dropped heavily to the floor.

April's hands went to her throat; she was too terrified to scream.

The doorbell rang again.

"Pizza delivery!" a youthful voice called.

Philip Caunt's mind went into overdrive. "Just a minute!" he called back. He squeezed the trigger and there was a *poump!* The slug pitched April onto the bed.

Caunt walked into the living room and opened the door. "Come on in," he said, concealing the gun behind him. "Just put it there on the coffee table." A smiling young black man walked in, the boxed pizza in both hands. Before he got to the table, Caunt shot him twice in the back . . .

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Milena Quevas opened the door of her apartment and found a smiling priest standing there.

"Hello, young lady," he said. "Is Candida Quevas at home?"

"No, Father. She's working."

"I see. Well, I must talk to her at once. It's about her boy friend Ramon. Where does she work?"

Milena blushed, embarrassed. "I'm not sure you want to see her there, Father."

"Indeed? Why not?"

"Well, Father, it's a—it's a—"

"Come, come, child, this is urgent," Atlas pressed.

"It's a go-go club, Father," said Milena, mortified. "The Club San Juan. On Lenox, near a Hundred and Thirty-ninth."

"Thank you, child."

Milena shuddered as he hurried away. The priest was not like any other she had ever encountered.

Faracy was back in the Club San Juan. It was busy now—crowded, smoky, noisy. He stood against the back wall, ignoring occasional hostile looks from the regular patrons. On a small circular stage behind the bar, in a spotlight of hazy incandescence, with a floor-to-ceiling mirror behind her, Candida Quevas danced in red bikini briefs and spike heels, moving her body erotically to a vibrant Latin beat.

As Faracy stood there, the front door to the club opened and closed, changing momentarily the shading of light along the back wall. Glancing over, Faracy saw that, incongruously, a priest had entered. Staring at him, Faracy frowned. There was something vaguely familiar about him.

"Candida, I love you!" shouted a slightly drunk man from the audience. The other patrons laughed.

At the sound of Candida's name, Faracy saw the priest reach under his coat and raise a gun. Then he realized who the man was. John Atlas!

Faracy pushed away from the wall as he saw Atlas steady the pistol and take aim. Bulling past several other patrons also standing in the rear, Faracy lunged at Atlas and knocked him off balance just as he fired. In the wake of the shot, Atlas stumbled backward and was trying to regain his balance when Faracy lunged and brought him down.

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The club suddenly became like a zoo in a rainstorm. Everyone was yelling, running, hiding. Candida stood still, her eyes wide, looking out off the stage. Behind her, the floor-to-ceiling mirror had been shattered by the single bullet and glass shards covered the stage. Faracy, seeing Atlas trying to maneuver the pistol for another shot, plunged into the crowd and fought his way to the stage. Seizing the petrified Candida, he hurried her behind the curtain.

"Now will you believe that you and Ramon are in danger?" He looked around. "How the hell can we get out of this place?"

"This way—" The frightened woman mustered some control. She led him toward a rear door, then stopped. "Wait—I can't go outside like this," she said, glancing down at her nearly naked body. Dashing to a row of metal lockers on one wall, she threw open the door to one and snatched out a raincoat and her purse. Then she rushed back to Faracy and they hurried outside to the alley. Running down the alley, they stopped just before reaching the street and huddled together in a darkened doorway. Candida's mind was alert again.

"My apartment's only two blocks from here. We can go there and try to call Ramon again," she said.

Faracy vetoed the idea. "The man who shot at you probably knows where you live. He might be heading there right now."

Candida looked at him in horror. "My God! I've got a daughter at home!"

Milena Quevas was sitting on the front stoop talking to a boy named Rodrigo from one of her high-school classes. The front window to her apartment, which looked out on the stoop, was open so that she could hear the phone when it rang. Her mother always called sometime during the evening to see if she was all right.

As they were talking, Milena saw the priest who had been there earlier come around the corner. "That priest came to see my mother a little while ago," she told Rodrigo. "I don't know what he wanted, but there's something funny about him."

"Come on, Milena," the young man scoffed.

Just then Milena heard her phone ring. "Back in a minute," she said and hurried inside.

Her mother's voice on the line was harsh with urgency. "Milena, has there been a priest there?"

"Yes, Mama, and he's coming back. I saw him on the street just now."

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"Milena, get out!" Candida all but screamed. "Run! Now! Out the back way!"

Looking out the window, Milena saw the priest crossing the street toward the building. "Where should I go, Mama? The club?"

"No, not the club, don't go there!" At the pay phone from which she was calling, Candida looked around frantically. "Where should she go?" she asked Faracy, next to her. He quickly glanced up and down the street and pointed. "The Burger Palace, Milena!" Candida said. "Hurry, baby!"

Through the window, Milena saw the priest walk up to the stoop. "Hello, Father," Rodrigo said respectfully.

"Hello, my boy," said John Atlas.

Milena hung up the phone and moved stealthily into the hall. She heard the priest ask, "Has Mrs. Quevas come home, do you know?"

"I don't think so, Father," Rodrigo replied, "but her daughter is home."

Thanks a lot, you nerd, Milena thought. I just told you there's something funny about him and you tell him I'm home.

Easing down the hall, she slipped out the back door and hurried up the alley.

At the Burger Palace, Candida rushed to embrace her daughter. "Thank God you're safe, baby," she said, fighting back tears.

"Mama, what's going on, what's happening?"

"I don't know—it's confusing. It has something to do with Ramon—someone's trying to kill him, and me, too." Candida led her daughter to a rear booth that couldn't be seen from the street and continued trying to explain, as best she could, what had happened since Faracy first approached her earlier that evening at the club.

Faracy himself was several blocks away, cautiously approaching the building where Candida told him Ramon Sedillo lived. His eyes scanning the street, sidewalk, and doorways for any sign of John Atlas, his heart beat nervously and his ulcer burned. He couldn't be certain that Atlas wasn't watching him at that very moment, waiting for him to come into range to be shot, but Faracy had to keep going—he had to know whether Ramon was still alive or if Atlas had already found him.

From a darkened stoop directly across the street from Ramon's building, Faracy watched for several moments, then decided he had to make a move. Waiting too long had its dangers, too. Drawing up his courage, he stepped from the shadows and walked briskly over

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to Ramon's building, up the stairs of the stoop, and quickly inside. Third floor rear, Candida had told him. He climbed the stairs two at a time.

At Ramon's apartment, he wiped his face with his sleeve and listened at the door for a moment. Hearing nothing, he carefully turned the doorknob. The door wasn't locked. His heart going wild now, Faracy eased into Ramon's apartment.

At the desk in the study of his Washington home, FBI deputy director Fred Collins heard a soft telephone tone coming from a bottom drawer. Unlocking and opening the drawer, he picked up the receiver of his most private line. "Yes?"

"Philip Caunt, sir," said the caller. "I'm unable to reach Mr. A. My instructions for such an eventuality were to contact you."

"All right. Give me a status report."

"Subject number one," said Caunt, referring to Bill Pete Joiner, "has been canceled. It was also necessary to cancel his wife and a mistress he kept. There was one witness, a delivery man, who also had to be neutralized. But the situation at this location is now under control."

"All right, Philip, I want you to proceed now to subject number two," said Collins, referring to Rod Prater in Los Angeles.

"Yes, sir." Caunt paused, then asked, "May I know the whereabouts of Mr. A? It's very unusual for me not to be able to reach him."

"Nothing to worry about," Collins said. "He decided to attend to subject number three himself, so he's in the field. By the time you finish with number two, I'm sure he'll be back. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Goodbye, then."

Collins hung up. Psycho son of a bitch, he thought. He's sent out to apprehend one person and he kills four. Surely there must have been a better way to handle it. And Atlas was in Spanish Harlem to do three others. That would make seven! How many more bodies would there be to account for before this mess was cleared up?

All because that egghead scientist had failed to take the simple precaution of double-locking his hotel-room door!

In the back booth of the Burger Palace, Candida and Milena were in each other's arms, crying softly. Faracy had just returned and told them Ramon was dead. "There was no sign of violence of any

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kind," he told them quietly. "He was probably injected with something."

"It's my fault," Candida said tearfully. "I should have listened to you earlier."

"I don't think it would have mattered," Faracy said, patting her shoulder. "I think he was dead before then." It was a lie to try and relieve some of her grief. Ramon, he knew, had only been dead a short time. To Milena he said, "You and your mother stay here. I've got to make a call."

There was a pay phone on the wall nearby and Faracy used it to place a collect call to Lila. The evening news hour was over, so he tried her apartment first. She answered at once.

"Curt!" she said when she heard his voice. "Where are you?"

"Still in New York," he said. "They got to the Puerto Rican waiter before I did. He's dead. That means I've got to try and reach one of those salesmen. But first I've got another problem."

"What is it?" Lila asked.

"The waiter had a girl friend—the go-go dancer I was waiting to see earlier. They probably slept together last night, so she may now be carrying the specimen herself. Also, she's got a teenaged daughter. John Atlas is after both of them. They need a safe place to hide. Will you let me bring them there?"

"Of course I will, Curt," she said. "How will you get here?"

"I'll use the train again. There's a Metroliner from here every hour."

"What time will you be here?"

"I'm not sure. Sometime tonight. Let me give you the phone numbers of Joiner and Prater, the two Norcom men. See if you can contact either one of them. If you can, find out where I can reach one or both of them for the rest of the night. Stress how important it is."

"I know how to handle it, Curt," she assured him. "You just get here as quickly as you can with the woman and her daughter. Curt, are you all right?"

"I'm running down," he admitted. "But I can't stop now. If these people catch me before I can prove what's happened, they'll either kill me or convince everyone that I'm crazy and lock me in an asylum for the rest of my life. Listen, I've got to get going. I'll call you from a train phone enroute so you can meet us."

"All right, Curt."

Faracy hung up and went back to Candida and Milena.

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In her Washington apartment, Lila hung up the phone in the bedroom and walked out to her living room. Arnold Bygraves was just hanging up the extension next to the couch where he sat.

By the time the Amtrak Metroliner passed through Trenton, Milena was stretched out in a recliner seat fast asleep. Her mother and Faracy sat across the aisle from her, drinking coffee out of disposable cups and talking in low tones. Curt had been trying to explain to Candida why she, Ramon, and the others had suddenly become targets of government agents and professional assassins.

"It's because they know so little about the specimen that it frightens them. They're afraid that whatever it is might cause them to lose their superiority as a species."

"I still don't see what it has to do with me," Candida said. "I didn't touch the stupid specimen."

"They think you may have been impregnated by Ramon when you had sex with him."

"But I never had sex with Ramon!" she declared. "I've never been to bed with him!"

Faracy stared at her in the dimly lit passenger car, unsure whether to believe her or not. "They must have thought you did," he said.

"Well, they're wrong," she stated unequivocally. She swore briefly in Spanish, then said in English, "I'll bet Ramon shot his mouth off, telling people he made it with me." Which, she reminded herself, was exactly what she wanted in order to keep the wolves from her door. So she supposed she probably was at least partially responsible for his death. She shook her head in misery. "Why didn't I listen to you earlier?"

"It wouldn't have mattered," Faracy lied to her again. He took her hand. "Try not to think about it. Get some rest. We'll be in Washington soon and you'll have a safe place to stay."

At Union Station in Washington, Faracy, Candida, and Milena walked down the platform with other arriving passengers toward the terminal. Unnoticed by them, two men in porter uniforms fell in a short distance behind them. Two other men dressed like platform workers did the same.

As soon as they were inside the terminal, Faracy looked around for Lila, and found her almost at once. She was on the mezzanine, looking down at them. When their eyes met, Faracy waved briefly.

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"There's the lady you'll be staying with," he told Candida. He started to say something else, but then he noticed, on another part of the mezzanine, a television cameraman aiming a video camera at him. "Hold it!" he said, reaching out to stop his companions. His eyes began scanning. On the opposite side of the mezzanine he spotted another cameraman doing the same thing, this one with a zoom lens that was fully extended. Faracy looked back at Lila for a second, incredulous. Was it possible that she—?

Then he saw another familiar face and knew it wasn't only possible but certain. Fred Collins, four FBI agents in his wake, was walking briskly toward them from one direction and Arnold Bygraves and four other agents from another.

"Back to the platform," Faracy said urgently, taking Candida and Milena by the arm and retreating. He hurried them past the exit doors onto the wide platform where their Metroliner was parked. As they started down the platform, the two men dressed as porters blocked their way and the two dressed as platform workers moved to flank them. Faracy stopped, holding Candida and Milena back with him. Desperately he looked around, but there was noplace to go.

"Curt!" shouted Dr. Bygraves. "Stop—you can't get away!" He and Collins and their agents edged cautiously closer. "It's over, Curt! You know the Puerto Rican waiter is dead. The man in Memphis is, too. You and the woman and the girl come along quietly with us, I guarantee you won't be harmed."

Fred Collins took a pair of handcuffs from one of his agents and stepped toward Faracy.

"No!" From her purse, Candida suddenly produced a .25-caliber automatic, one of the "Saturday night specials" women in Spanish Harlem and other risky areas carried to protect themselves. In a surprising move, she darted to Fred Collins and put the gun to his head. "Tell your men to get away from us or I'll shoot you!" she ordered.

"Young woman, I'm a federal agent with the FBI," Collins said threateningly.

"You gonna be a dead federal agent if you don't do what I say!" Candida warned him.

"Better listen to her, Collins," Faracy said. "This is Ramon's girl friend—and she knows you had Ramon killed."

"I did nothing of the kind."

"You were part of it," Faracy asserted. "Call off your men—now!"

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"Go to hell, Faracy."

"Then shoot him, Candida," Faracy said.

"All right, all right!" Collins quickly conceded. "All agents back off!" he ordered.

"Send them back into the terminal."

"Go back into the terminal, all of you!" Collins ordered.

As the agents and Bygraves moved away from them and back through the exit doors, Faracy disarmed Fred Collins and turned the FBI man's own gun on him. With Candida and Milena at his side, he guided Collins down the long platform until they reached the end of the Metroliner. There they went down several wooden steps to track level and worked their way across several sets of tracks, all with trains standing on them.

"This isn't going to work, Faracy," said Collins. "You're only making things worse for yourself."

"Shut up. Keep moving." Curt jabbed the gun roughly in the FBI man's ribs.

They crossed more tracks, Faracy pausing to look far down each platform to see if the agents were spreading out to stop them. Seeing no one, he continued prodding his captive along, Candida and Milena hurrying behind them, until presently they reached a platform where a train was getting ready to depart. A loudspeaker on the platform announced, "Last call for passengers to board the *Virginia Limited* for Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Richmond, and Norfolk! Now ready for departure from Platform Twenty-two! All aboard, please!"

Faracy pushed Collins up against a platform pillar. "This is as far as you go," he said coldly, and struck him smartly in the back of the head with the gun. Collins dropped unconscious to the tracks and Faracy quickly rolled him under the platform. Then he stuck the gun in his belt and grabbed Candida and her daughter by the arm again. They hurried up the steps to platform level and got aboard the first passenger car of the *Virginia Limited* that they came to.

Fred Collins was just coming to when one of his agents found him and helped him to the terminal first-aid station. With an ice compress on his head, and after a whiff of ammonium carbonate, the FBI man's alertness returned and he asked, "Do we know where he is?"

"Not yet, sir," his second-in-command replied. "We have agents searching the entire terminal and we're wiring ahead for agents to

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board three trains that departed while we were searching for you."

A terminal security guard stuck his head in the door and asked, "Either one of you Collins?"

"I am," the deputy director replied.

"Call being conferenced in for you from FBI headquarters," the guard told him, pointing to a phone on the nurse's desk. The agent handed it to Collins.

"Yes? This is Collins."

"John here, Fred. Is this line secure?"

"No."

"Well, you know where I am," Atlas said. "The primary subject here has been attended to. But there's a secondary subject, a woman—"

"I know about her," Collins said. "She's traveling with the doctor. They were just here but unfortunately we lost them." The FBI man pursed his lips for a moment, then said, "The doctor knows there's just one primary subject left: the one in Los Angeles. He's almost certain to try and get to him. I've already dispatched your young man there, but you'd better go out and take over. Any problem with that?"

"No problem," said Atlas. "In fact, it will be my pleasure."

"Keep in touch," Collins said.

"Right."

At the Port Authority terminal in Manhattan, where he was calling from, John Atlas made another call, to his own headquarters.

"I want an agency plane to pick me up at the Flushing airport. I'll be there in an hour. As soon as the pilot lands, have him fuel up and file a flight plan to Burbank, California."

Faracy bought their tickets from the conductor on the *Virginia Limited*. Then, because he was by now actually weak from hunger, the three of them went into the dinette car and ordered sandwiches. As Faracy ate, he told Candida what he planned to do next.

"I've got to get out to California and try to catch the last of the three exposed men who is still alive. What we'll do is get off the train at Alexandria and find a bank with a teller machine. I'll get as much cash as I can and give it to you and Milena. The two of you wait in Alexandria for the next train to Miami, and go down there. There's a very big Puerto Rican community there—it shouldn't be hard for you to lose yourselves."

"No, we'll stay with you," Candida said decisively.

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Taken aback, Faracy said, "You can't stay with me. It's too dangerous. Anyway, I haven't got time to look after you."

"Ha!" Candida exclaimed. "It was me looking after you back in that train depot. If it wasn't for me, you'd be in their hands now." She shook her head emphatically. "Milena and I will stay with you."

"But that's crazy," he tried to reason with her. "Staying with me can only get you in more trouble."

"I think the one way we'll get *out* of trouble is to stay with you. Poor Ramon is dead back in New York and Milena and I have disappeared. How does that look to the police? You're the only one who can prove to them what happened with that fake priest and all. We'll stay with you."

Faracy continued to try to get her to see it his way, but Candida stubbornly stuck to the position she had taken, Milena nodding her head in agreement with everything her mother said and shaking her head negatively whenever Faracy argued back. Finally Faracy gave in.

"All right, I'll take you with me to Los Angeles, but as soon as we get there you'll have to check into a motel somewhere and wait for me. You can't come with me when I try to find this man."

"Okay," Candida said, "you're the boss."

Faracy gave her a pained look. Milena smiled at her mother. Mama knew how to handle men, all right.

When the train was approaching Alexandria, Faracy said, "There may be police or FBI agents waiting to check the train. We won't get off right away. Come on—"

He led them from the dinette back to the domed observation car and they waited by the platform door there as the train slowed to a crawl at the Alexandria depot. No passengers were debarking from the dome-car door, but Faracy could see people getting off farther up the train. He also saw four men in business suits standing at various points on the platform, watching passengers get off. Finally, when no more people were getting off and all boarding passengers had gotten on, one of the men nodded as a signal and all four of them boarded separate passenger cars.

The train started its slow creep forward to leave the station. As it did, Faracy opened the dome-car door, stepped off, and in turn helped Milena and then Candida swing off. Quickly they crossed the platform out of sight around the depot building.

"That was fun!" Milena said excitedly.

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Her mother smiled back. "Yeah, we make pretty good fugitives."

Crazy, Faracy thought. These two were completely crazy.

They made their way by taxi from Alexandria to a bus stop on the Mt. Vernon Memorial Highway, and from there traveled by airport-shuttle bus back up to Washington National Airport.

"They shouldn't be looking for us at the airport," Faracy reasoned to Candida and Milena, "if they think we got out of town on a train."

Even so, they separated and entered the departure terminal by two different doors and sat in different airline sections, observing the activity around them. When Faracy decided it was safe, he went to one of the gift shops and bought a small canvas suitcase and a dozen odd souvenir T-shirts. In a men's-room stall, he wrapped Candida's automatic and the pistol he had taken from Fred Collins in the shirts and put them in the suitcase. Then he went to the American Express dispenser machine and used his card to get fifteen hundred dollars, the limit, in travelers checks. At the Delta counter, he bought three coach tickets on their redeye flight to Los Angeles and checked the canvas bag.

Candida and Milena had never flown before. Candida's journey from Puerto Rico had been with her parents by boat to Miami, and from there to New York by bus. Both she and Milena were nervous about the plane and clung to Faracy, one on each arm, like frightened children. The flight was only about half full, mostly with tired, rumpled businessmen, so it was easy for them to get three seats across. Candida insisted Faracy take the middle seat so that she and Milena could both draw courage by hanging onto him. When the plane took off, they closed their eyes and braced themselves for the inevitable crash. Only after they were airborne did they begin to relax. Landing had not yet entered their minds.

As the plane flew smoothly through a calm sky, Milena grew sleepy again and Faracy moved himself and Candida to another row so that he could fold back the armrests and let the girl lie down with a pillow and a blanket. The cabin lights were off, the only illumination an individual seatlight here and there. Faracy and Candida ordered drinks from the cabin attendant and sat talking quietly in the darkened row behind Milena. Faracy spoke bitterly of Lila and how she had betrayed him.

"Maybe she had to do it," Candida suggested. "Maybe she was forced in some way. You shouldn't judge her until you know for sure."

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From time to time, she leaned over the seat to check on her daughter, but after a while she relaxed and began to tell Faracy a little about herself.

"When I was a child," she said, "I shared a dream with my parents about one day coming to the U.S. and finding a better life. It's the old story, you know: everybody who comes here thinks that things will automatically get better for them. Most of the time it is not so. All it did for my parents and me was take us from the poor life of a little village to the poor life of a big city. My father and mother worked very hard at whatever jobs they could get, but they never made more than just enough for us to get by.

"And I was no help to them at all," she admitted sadly. "I was so disappointed by the life we found here that I guess I just gave up dreaming. I started running around and smoking dope. And I got exactly what most little sluts get: I got pregnant. It broke my father's heart.

"He disowned me. He took my mother back to Puerto Rico and wouldn't let me go with them. I ended up in a charity ward to have Milena. The social workers almost took her away from me, too—I had to beg and plead to keep her. They gave me a chance, thank God, and I straightened up. I went to work in a laundry while my baby was at a day-care center. I slaved like a dog trying to get a little something ahead to make things better for us. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't save a dime. Finally, I went to work dancing topless and then I was able to pay my way to beautician school. As soon as I get my beautician's license, I'm going to quit the club and go to work for a nice salon somewhere. Maybe someday I'll even open a shop of my own."

Faracy reached over and took her hand. "I hope you get everything you want out of life," he said.

Candida put her other hand over his and they sat that way for a while, turned partly toward each other.

Their faces were very close because they had been whispering. Faracy could feel her breath on his face—warm and soft, with a smell that reminded him of something sweet that had slightly burned. Before long, her head was leaning against him, her cheek on his chest, and he raised the armrest between them so that their bodies wouldn't be separated.

"You are very nice," Candida whispered. "I have never known anyone like you, anyone as nice as you . . ."

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John Atlas arrived in Burbank an hour after the California sun came up. After his private jet set down, rather than use the plane's radio he went into the terminal and found a public telephone to call his Los Angeles office. He had the night-duty switchboard operator patch him through to Philip Caunt in the field.

"Where are you, Philip?" he asked.

"Watching the Prater apartment in Westwood from a surveillance van, sir," Caunt told him. "There's been no sign of him since I got here at daybreak."

"I know where he is," said Atlas. "There was an in-flight message from Collins. His people found out that Prater visited Norcom's corporate headquarters yesterday and stayed overnight in Milwaukee. They put him under surveillance there. He left Milwaukee early this morning on a United flight and is due into LAX at nine-twenty. Philip, I want you to breach his apartment. I'll be there as soon as I can and we'll wait for Mr. Prater together."

"Yes, sir."

We'll wait for Faracy, too, Atlas thought coldly as he hung up.

As Caunt went up to Rod Prater's second-floor apartment, he passed a handsome young man in a red windbreaker coming down the stairs, smiling and humming. There's someone who enjoys going to work as much as I do, Caunt thought. How very lucky he was that John Atlas took such good care of him. He felt sorry for people who had no one that cared about them.

He waited until the young man was well on his way before continuing on to Prater's apartment. With a lock-picking tool, he had the door open and was inside within seconds. After making sure no one was in the apartment, he went into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of milk. Back in the living room, he sat on the couch, put his feet up on the coffee table, and sipped the milk as he waited for Atlas to arrive.

The Delta redeye from Washington arrived at LAX and while Faracy went to claim the bag with the guns in it, Candida and Milena freshened up in the ladies room.

"You like him, don't you, Mama?" Milena asked.

Candida sighed quietly. "Yes. Very much."

"So do I," Milena said with a happy smile.

Candida looked a little sadly at her. "Nothing will come of it, baby. There's too much difference between us."

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She and her daughter embraced. They knew they had each other, no matter what.

Faracy, leaving the luggage carousel with the small bag, went at once to a pay phone and tried to call Rod Prater. There was no answer. In a telephone directory, he looked up Prater's name and wrote down his address. Going to the Avis counter, he rented a car and obtained a street map which the counter attendant marked with directions to Westwood.

"I'm going to find a motel for you," Faracy said when they were all in the rental car.

"You should let us go with you," Candida said.

"No. And don't argue."

"I won't argue. But suppose this man Prater doesn't believe you? No one else has, you know. If we were with you, maybe that would help convince him."

Faracy had to admit she had a point. So far he hadn't been able to convince anyone that his story wasn't a big joke or a big mistake. Maybe the presence of Candida, who could verify being shot at, would make a difference. "All right, you can come with me," he said. "But you must do exactly as I say at all times, is that understood?"

"Of course. You are the man, you are the boss," Candida replied with a straight face.

"If I'm the boss," Faracy asked her, "how is it you always get your way?"

When they arrived at Prater's apartment building, Faracy drove past and parked a block away.

"I want you and Milena to wait in the car," he told Candida as he took Fred Collins' gun from the bag. "I'm going to check with the building manager to see if they know when Prater's expected back."

Walking warily toward the building, he was on the alert for any agents, either FBI or from the Atlas Agency, who might be there ahead of him. He saw no one suspicious. When he reached the building without incident, he decided on impulse to try Prater's apartment first.

Ringing the bell to Prater's door, he waited. Philip Caunt opened the door.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Rod Prater," said Faracy.

"He's not in right now," said Caunt with a smile. "What did you want?"

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Faracy put a hand into his coat pocket and closed it around the gun. "Let's talk inside," he said. "I've got a gun pointed at you in my pocket. Do exactly as I say or I'll shoot you." Pushing Caunt back inside, he stepped in and closed the door.

Searching Caunt, he found the silencer-equipped gun and disarmed him. In Caunt's wallet, he found an identification card from Atlas International Detective Agency. "I thought so," he said. He pushed Caunt up against a wall. "Where's Rod Prater?"

"I wouldn't know," Caunt said, hands over his head. "You can see I'm waiting for him myself."

Just then, the telephone rang. Backing over to it, Faracy picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Hello, Dr. Faracy. This is John Atlas. I was just driving up when you left your car several minutes ago. Since you're answering the phone, I presume you've somehow gotten the advantage over my man in there. That being the case, I'm sure you'll be interested in knowing that *I* have the advantage over Mrs. Quevas and her daughter out here. I have a gun on them. We're at a pay phone directly across the street—you can see us if you look out the window."

The phone still to his ear, Faracy stepped to a window and looked out. Atlas was telling the truth.

"Disarm yourself and put my man on the phone," Atlas ordered. "If you don't, I'll kill these two where they stand. I think you know I'm not bluffing, Faracy."

Faracy swallowed drily. "All right. Whatever you say. Don't hurt them." He put down the gun and surrendered to Philip Caunt.

"Okay, I've got him," Caunt told Atlas over the phone.

Moments later, Atlas was at the door with Candida and Milena. "Well now, isn't this cozy," he said malevolently when they were all inside. His lips curled hatefully at Faracy. "I believe I owe you something, Doctor."

Atlas smashed the barrel of his gun against Faracy's face, splitting his cheek. Faracy dropped to the floor, unconscious.

When he came to minutes later, he was still on the floor. Candida was holding an ice-filled towel to his bloody face. When his eyes focused, Faracy saw Atlas sitting in a nearby chair, still holding a gun. Milena was in a forced kneeling position beside the chair, Atlas holding her firmly by the wrist.

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Caunt, watching out the apartment window, suddenly said, "I think he's coming!" He stepped behind the door, gun drawn and ready.

The apartment door opened and two men entered. Faracy recognized one as Rod Prater. The other was the handsome young man in the red windbreaker Caunt passed on the stairs earlier. Just inside the door, before they noticed the intruders in the apartment, Prater set down his suitcase and the two men embraced.

"I missed you terribly," Prater said.

Caunt kicked the door shut and leveled his gun at them. Atlas stared at the two men incredulously. On the floor, Faracy began to laugh. "You should have done a little more checking, Atlas," he said. "You could have eliminated this one at the beginning. The egesta reproduces only in bodies capable of incubating it. *Female* bodies. If it enters a male body, it dies. It looks like you went to a lot of trouble for nothing."

"Not necessarily," Atlas retorted, rising, pulling Milena up with him. "I've still got you, Doctor. And the woman. And—" he leered at Milena "—this little bonus here."

Milena pulled away and thrust her forearm into Atlas's windpipe with all her might. He turned white and fell to his knees and Faracy made a scrambled dive for his gun. Caunt turned from the two men he was covering, arcing his own gun around, and fired at Faracy. But Faracy was moving too fast and the bullet slammed into the wall. While the shot was still resounding in the room, Faracy emptied Atlas's gun into Caunt. Caunt's Adam's apple bobbed as each bullet hit him and he fell dead.

Faracy snatched up Caunt's gun. He guided Candida and Milena to the apartment door. "Wait in the car, I'll be right there!" As they left, Faracy turned to Rod Prater and his friend. "In there," he said, waving the gun toward the bedroom.

He went in with them and disconnected the extension phone. "Just wait quietly in here and you won't get hurt," he told them. "Some FBI agents will arrive soon to explain everything." Taking the extension phone with him, he left the two men in the bedroom and closed the door.

John Atlas was still on the floor, clutching his throat. Faracy stepped over to him. "I wish there was some way to destroy you legally, Atlas," he said. "But I've seen enough in the last two days to know that it isn't possible. You're too powerful; you have too many friends in high places. There's only one way to destroy a germ

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like you." Aiming the gun, he executed John Atlas with a single bullet in the head.

Using the living-room phone, Faracy called FBI Headquarters in Washington and was put through to Fred Collins.

"Well, Doctor, what a surprise," said Collins when he picked up.

"I've got some other surprises for you," Faracy told him. "John Atlas is dead. So is that young killer who worked for him. And Rod Prater, the last exposed man, is gay, so your problem with his uncontrolled egesta is solved—it'll kill itself. You'll find the bodies I just mentioned at Prater's address, along with Prater and a friend who don't know what the hell's going on. You'd better get some of your local agents here as quickly as possible with a good cover story."

"Exactly what are your plans now, Doctor?" asked Collins.

"I'm going to go somewhere and put this all down on paper," Faracy said. "Then I'm going to leave it in a sealed envelope with some reliable member of the scientific community, someone who has no connection at all with the government, someone who'll do something with it if I should disappear or die under odd circumstances."

"What is it you want, Faracy?"

"I'll discuss that tomorrow—with Arnold Bygraves," Faracy said.

In a motel suite on the ocean in Santa Barbara, Curt Faracy sat down at the desk and direct-dialed the private number of Arnold Bygraves at the Department of Scientific Studies in Washington. As he waited for the connection to be made, Faracy glanced at himself in a mirror next to the desk. The left side of his face, under a large bandage, was swollen grotesquely. At an emergency room in the San Fernando Valley the previous day, a young resident doctor had taken eighteen stitches to close the gash put in Faracy's face by John Atlas. Faracy had told the doctor that a gallon can of paint had fallen off a shelf and hit him. He wasn't sure the doctor believed his story, but it didn't matter. Faracy had left the hospital without incident, and in the rented car had driven with Candida and Milena up the Pacific coast to Santa Barbara.

From the desk, as he waited for his call to go through, Faracy looked out an open patio door and saw Candida and Milena, in newly purchased swimsuits, frolicking in the surf of the ocean. He had awakened that morning to the smell of fresh coffee. The women had

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been out for groceries and were cooking an aromatic breakfast they hoped he would be able to eat.

The look on his face as he watched them on the beach disappeared when he heard the voice of Arnold Bygraves come on the line.

"Good morning, Curt," the DSS director said easily. "Fred Collins told me I'd be hearing from you."

"I presume he also told you about the written account I was going to prepare and put in the hands of a reliable colleague. I've done that, Arnold. It's already in the mail."

"What is it you want, Curt?" the older doctor asked.

"You told me at the depot in Washington that this thing was all over," Faracy reminded him. "It wasn't then, but it can be now. I want it to *really* be over, Arnold. For me, for Candida Quevas and her daughter, for everybody."

"I suppose you've decided how you want that accomplished?"

"I have," Faracy confirmed. "I want a funeral, Arnold."

The next day, Faracy, Candida, and Milena drove onto the parking lot of a mausoleum in San Francisco. Fred Collins was already there, waiting for them.

"This way," Collins said.

They followed him around behind the mausoleum to a crematorium. Inside, Arnold Bygraves and Lila Goddard waited next to a conveyor which tracked on rollers into a furnace. Lila's eyes fixed on Faracy the moment he entered, studying his swollen, bandaged face, seeking a glance, a nod, some kind of recognition from him. Faracy did not oblige. Instead, he stared at Arnold Bygraves until Bygraves opened an aluminum suitcase and, with lead gloves on his hands, removed a sealed, thick-glass laboratory container. In the container was the same viscid, glutinous yellow substance that had contaminated Rod Prater, Bill Pete Joiner, and Ramon Sedillo.

"You'll want to check the quantity, I suppose," Bygraves said.

Without answering, Faracy leaned over to see the quantity gauge markings on the side of the container. He knew exactly how much specimen there should be, to the milliliter. Seeing that the amount was accurate, he nodded to Bygraves to proceed. Bygraves placed the container on the conveyor and signaled a crematorium technician at a nearby console. As the technician began to press console keys, the furnace doors opened to reveal a blazing fire inside it and the conveyor belt began to move. When it felt the heat, the specimen in the container surged wildly as if it knew and dreaded what was about

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to happen. The container was moved directly into the engulfing flames and the doors of the furnace closed. Seconds later there was a loud noise, like a firecracker, as the container exploded and its contents were vaporized.

Afterword

In the surgical scrub room of a Memphis hospital, a doctor was talking to two colleagues after surgery.

"Weirdest damned thing I ever saw," he said. "Bullet made a path downward through the right trapezius, pierced the rhomboideus muscle, and headed directly for the left atrium of the heart. Sure death. Then for no apparent reason, without deflecting on anything, the damned slug curved downward through the lesser momentum and literally *dropped* into the stomach. When I got in there, that damned bullet was just lying there as pretty as you please, like it had been *swallowed*. I've seen a lot of gunshot wounds in my day, but never one that started out so badly and ended up so good."

As he stripped off his bloody scrubs, the surgeon stepped to a one-way window that looked out into the hallway leading to the recovery room. They were just wheeling his patient past. "She's a lucky young woman," he said, shaking his head.

On the gurney, still anesthetized, a young black woman named April was dreaming she was pregnant.

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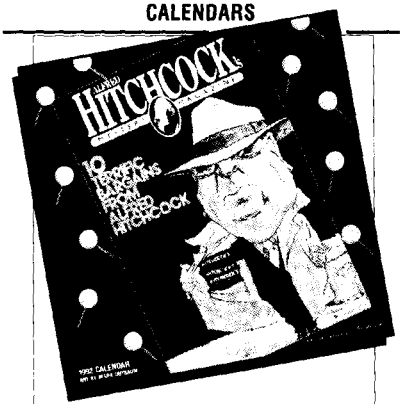

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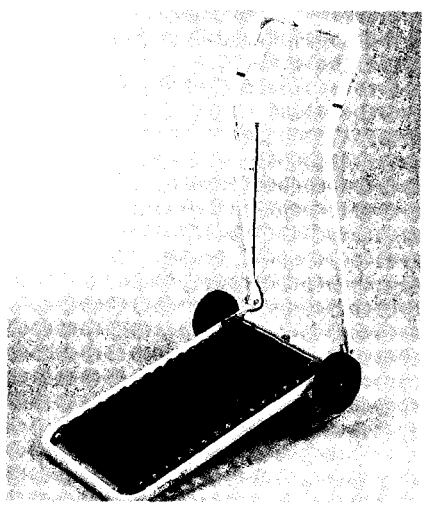

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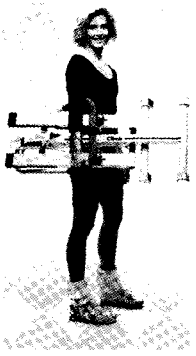

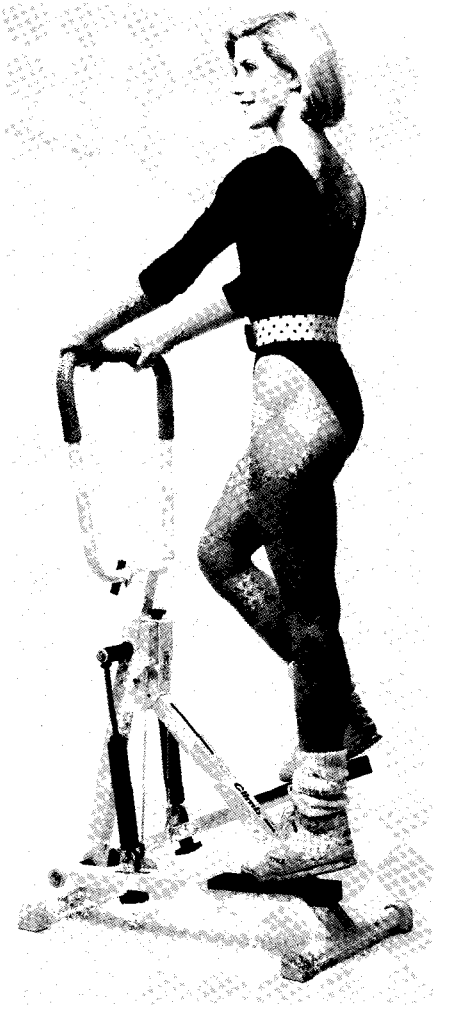

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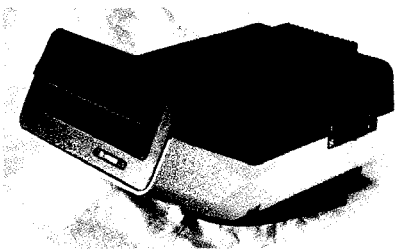

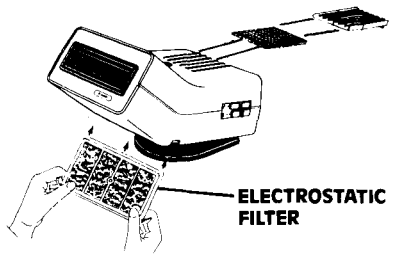

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
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▼ SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER

Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audiologic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! **$89.98** ($5.50) #A2000.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** Dept. 101 EL ; P.O.Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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